

Jacqueline Jules

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Session 3D Biblical Role Models

Biblical Characters

Jacqueline Jules

Role models inspire us. They give us courage to pursue our dreams. And no book is more loaded with role models than the Bible. Its stories have resonated for thousands of years because they give us examples of strong individuals who struggled to find meaning in their lives. Using songs, midrash, and projected images, Jacqueline will teach you how to bring the courage and resilience of Biblical heroes alive in the classroom.

**Jacqueline Jules** is the author of an award-winning Bible series by Kar-Ben Publishing, which includes *Abraham's Search for God*, *Sarah Laughs*, *Benjamin and the Silver Goblet*, and the soon-to-be-released *Miriam in the Desert*.

## **BIBLICAL ROLE MODELS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**

by Jacqueline Jules

Bible stories can be violent. Many include references to sexual liaisons and/or troubling family arguments. How do we teach young children about our biblical patriarchs and matriarchs without frightening them or upsetting their parents? This is the challenge that Jewish educators of primary school age children face. One solution is to look at the midrash, the wonderful legends rabbis have told for centuries to explain the nuances in the Torah.

Every word in the Torah counts, but some raise questions. Like how did all the animals arrive at the ark? The Torah says the animals went into the ark, two by two. It describes which beasts, both clean and unclean, should enter the ark. But it does not explain how giraffes, elephants, monkeys, rhinoceros, and all the other animals arrived at Noah's doorstep to board his enormous ark before the flood.

Years ago, I came across a delightful story in *The Diamond Tree* by Howard Schwartz called “The Giant Og and the Ark.” In this story, a giant goes to the four corners of the earth to collect the animals for Noah. When the flood comes, there is no room for him on the ark, so he rides on the roof. This arrangement works fine until the giant becomes hungry. The animals generously agree to share with the giant who brought them to ark to be saved. I loved this story and wanted to perform it. But I wasn’t quite sure how to make the idea of a giant visual in a storytelling experience without scaring my little preschoolers. When I talked the problem over with one of my storytelling friends, she suggested that I tell the story without the giant, to substitute another creature.

“Why not the Ziz from *The Hardest Word*?” my friend asked.

The idea intrigued me and I began writing *Noah and the Ziz*, in which the huge and wacky Ziz collects the animals for the ark. By the time I finished *Noah and the Ziz*, it was so focused on the collection of the animals, it bore no resemblance to “The Giant Og and the Ark” from *The Diamond Tree*. Instead, my story expanded just one little piece of the original tale that inspired it.

I used a similar technique to write all four of my Ziz books, immersing myself in Jewish folklore and then imagining an unexplained detail to create my own modern midrash. *The Princess and the Ziz*, the most recent book in the series, is based on a folktale about King Solomon’s daughter that is found in a variety of sources including *The Book of Legends* and *Aunt Naomi’s Jewish Fairy Tales and Legends*. It was the story that first introduced me to the great and wonderful Ziz, but one that took me years to understand well enough to write for children.

In this folktale, King Solomon locks his daughter in a tower to prevent her from marrying a man beneath her social class. Solomon's plans are foiled when a young scribe lost on a journey takes cover in the carcass of an ox. While the young man sleeps, a gigantic bird picks up the carcass and deposits it on the roof of the tower where the princess is imprisoned. The young man crawls out of the carcass and the two fall in love. In *The Book of Legends* version, King Solomon only finds out about the union after the princess becomes pregnant. He accepts the news with grace, admitting that two people who are meant to be together will find a way to be joined, regardless of obstacles. As an adult, I thought this story was wildly romantic. But I couldn't see how I could use it in my storytelling for children. A pregnant princess? An ox carcass deposited on a tower?

Years later, after I had written the other three Ziz books, I looked at the folktale about Solomon's daughter again and considered the *essence* of the story, rather than the gory details. Why not develop a relationship between the Ziz and the princess? Why not let them go on an adventure to find her beloved rather than having him dropped on the tower in the carcass of a dead animal? And the pregnancy—why not stop the story before things got that far?

So what does all this have to do with writing Bible stories? Quite a bit. As educators of young children, sometimes we have to stop the story before the princess gets pregnant. It is no accident that *Sarah Laughs*, my book about our biblical matriarch Sarah, ends before Hagar and Ishmael are banished into the desert. For one, it would make the picture book entirely too long. And two, I had no idea how I could explain that part of the story to young kids. I'll be honest with you, when Judy Groner and Madeline Wikler, my editors from Kar-Ben Publishing first suggested I write a book about

Abraham's wife, Sarah, I was a little leery. It's a story about a woman whose main goal in life is to have a baby. How do you make kids relate to that? Judy and Madeline invited me over for lunch to discuss my qualms. First, they assured me that young kids could understand that a woman would want to have a baby. After all, most preschoolers have firsthand experience with pregnant mommies (their own and their friends'). This was true, but I was still hesitant about making Sarah real to young kids. How could I make them care? Even more importantly, how could I make young children see Sarah as a role model, someone they should emulate and admire?

Since the first book in the series, *Abraham's Search for God*, (which I will discuss in a few moments), depicted Abraham as a young boy, I decided to begin my book when Sarah was still a girl. I looked into the midrash and commentary, using a number of sources, including but not exclusively Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Bible*, Adin Steinsaltz's *Biblical Images*, Joseph Telushkin's *Biblical Literacy*, and The Hertz Chumash.

I saw many references to Sarah's beauty. Her name meant princess. The first few pages of *Sarah Laughs* pictures our first matriarch as a lovely young girl who grows into a beautiful young woman.

“When Sarah walked to the well, everyone stopped to stare at the graceful way she carried the urn on her shoulder. Her eyes sparkled like water in the sunshine, and her smile was as warm as a hot drink on a cold night. Legend says that Sarah's laugh made the whole world clap hands with joy.”—from *Sarah Laughs*

In *Biblical Images*, Adin Steinsaltz depicts Sarah as an equal partner in Abrahams' journey, someone who not only supported his beliefs but taught others to believe in one God, too. Sarah may not have been the first feminist, but she was

definitely a pioneer, too, who taught monotheism alongside her husband, Abraham. Telling the story of Abraham's journey to Canaan through Sarah's eyes gave me the opportunity to emphasize this. Sarah is often criticized and remembered for her actions toward Hagar. However, during their wanderings through Canaan, the midrash praises her for her hospitality. She kept her tent open in the wilderness welcoming all who entered. There was a special blessing in the bread she baked for the Sabbath. As I studied and imagined her, I began to see Sarah as a role model for not only young children, but for me. I was touched by her courage to follow God's voice through the desert, to accept the delay of what she wanted most—a child—year after year. Isaac comes to Sarah in old age, after a lifetime of longing. Her life embodies the hope that our dreams will come true, no matter how long they are delayed. This is a powerful message, not just for children, but adults. Writing this book was an inspirational experience for me, and I'd like to thank the Sydney Taylor Award committee for recognizing *Sarah Laughs* in 2009 with a Sydney Taylor Honor Award for Younger Readers.

For many years, I was a Jewish educator. I ran Tot Shabbat groups. I taught Sunday school. I worked as a Jewish librarian in two different synagogues and did weekly story time lessons for a Jewish preschool. Teachers often came to me to ask for books on various topics. As a librarian, I was always ready to dig into the catalog and find appropriate titles. But one day, when a teacher came in and said, "I need a book about Abraham, one that explains how he came to believe in one God," I came up empty-handed. This occurred over ten years ago and there wasn't much available in my library, which was one of the largest Jewish libraries in Washington, D.C. I found one battered picture book with sepia line drawings and wordy chapters in musty religious school

textbooks, but no colorful picture books a teacher would enjoy reading aloud in a preschool class. This led me on a quest into the midrash. Maybe I could tell a story to the children when they came to me for storytime. First I thought I would tell the story of Abraham and the idols. It is a well-known midrash, but a little destructive for my taste. Was there something else? Then, I came across a midrash that depicts Abraham at three years old. He questions who created the world, considering both the sun and the moon as potential gods before deciding that there must be a higher power. The full text can be found on page 31 of *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah* edited by Hayim Bialik.

Like most storytellers, I never tell a story from one version. I look around and try to dig up all the different versions I can find and then combine them into an original telling, one that is uniquely my own. The midrash of Abraham searching for the one power who ruled the sun, the moon, and all things is also found in *The Classic Tales* by Ellen Frankel, *Legends of the Bible* by Louis Ginzberg, and several other sources.

So the first step in my process is research. After that, I examine the structure of the tale. Is it circular? Is it a traditional quest tale with the magical number of three attempts? And does it have room for a chorus? Adding a chorus is something I do whenever possible. Children love to sing and chant along. Giving them the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way always fosters a positive read aloud experience. Since this Abraham midrash had repetitive elements, it was natural to add a chorus, making it a story younger children could more readily enjoy.

The next addition was background material. The midrash provides only a snippet of Abraham's thinking. It doesn't explain to a young reader why Abraham's decision to believe in one God was important during his time period. That's why the first pages of

*Abraham's Search for God* are devoted to an explanation of idol worship and Abraham's reaction to it. Adapting Psalm 135—words I learned when I was a child in religious school and we all read in the Passover Hagaddah after the third cup of wine—I had young Abraham tell his father.

“Idols have mouths but cannot speak to me. They have ears but cannot hear me. How can an idol help me?”—from *Abraham's Search for God*

By describing young Abraham within the context of his society, I was able to show that he followed his own conscience regardless of what the people around him were doing. This also enabled me to depict Abraham as a thoughtful child, someone who observed the world around him and asked questions. When I do author talks, I often ask students if they question the world around them. I ask them if they feel God's presence in the beauty of nature. I admit that I am moved spiritually when I take hikes in wooded areas. Children can readily identify with both Abraham's sense of wonder in the natural world and his need to know who created it all. Abraham questioned the world around him, just as most children do. Children are naturally observant and in my opinion, naturally spiritual. “Who made the clouds? Who made the flowers?” These are questions every child considers. Thus, Abraham's journey to understand God is a model of their own thinking. It affirms their own emotions and questions as they consider the world around them.

But the belief in an invisible God is still a spiritual leap. It required some deductive reasoning on Abraham's part. And to take him full circle in this spiritual quest, I added some elements of a midrash I first found in Barbara Diamond Goldin's *A Child's Book of Midrash*. In this midrash, a rabbi tells an emperor to look at the sun. The emperor replies that he cannot without being blinded. The rabbi proceeds to ask how the emperor

could expect to look at the Almighty—the creator of all things—when the sun can't be directly faced. This is an amazingly logical explanation for rejecting idols in favor of one all powerful God. In a picture book with limited words, I couldn't add the whole midrash, but I could have Abraham look at the sun and realize it was too powerful to behold. This provided the groundwork for Abraham's conclusions a few pages later when he realizes:

“There is something greater than the sun and the moon and the thunder. There is something even more beautiful than the rainbow. One great power makes the sun and the moon take turns. One great power makes the rainbow follow the thunder. This great power rules the entire universe and sets everything in motion. This great power is the one true God.” —from *Abraham's Search for God*.

As a role model, the young Abraham was not problematic to write about. He is the quintessential example of a Biblical hero who chose his conscience over the customs and moral attitudes of his surrounding society. But my third story in this series, *Benjamin and the Silver Goblet*, did present some thorny issues. How does one explain the significance of Judah's decision to protect Benjamin when falsely accused in Joseph's court without giving some background of family betrayal? You can't. Fortunately, recalling the painful family dynamics between Jacob's sons increased the dramatic tension and helped provide a satisfying resolution. In *Benjamin and the Silver Goblet*, I had the opportunity to imagine what it was like for Benjamin, the youngest of Jacob's twelve sons, when he learns that his older brothers betrayed the family by selling Joseph into slavery. Benjamin fears for his own safety. He does not trust his brothers to defend him when he is falsely accused of stealing in Egypt. He believes he will be abandoned just as Joseph was. And so does the young reader.

But Judah surprises, he defends his youngest brother and offers his own life to protect him. This, of course, prompts Joseph to reveal his true identity, followed by a joyful family reunion.

How do you truly make up for a mistake? The story of Benjamin is one of the clearest models of repentance in the Torah. Benjamin's brothers did not make the same mistake twice. They showed they were sorry by refusing to leave Benjamin behind. This story shows children that you must do more than be sorry, you must behave differently the next time. And Joseph's response to his brothers, his forgiveness, is just as powerful. The story of Benjamin, Joseph, and their brothers reminds us that forgiving our loved ones is a healing experience for everyone.

I fell in love with this story of betrayal and repentance some 25 years ago, when I heard a rabbi discuss it in a sermon. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to re-tell this story for children and even more privileged to accept the recognition of a silver medal from the Sydney Taylor Award committee at this convention.

In my newest book in this Bible series, *Miriam in the Desert*, I follow Miriam, the sister of Moses, and her grandson, Bezalel, as they witness the miracles in the desert. Once again, I was fascinated by a Biblical heroine, facing one hardship after another with fortitude and faith. Steinsaltz in *Biblical Images* says that Miriam, like Sarah, was a leader in her own right. I loved imagining this Biblical matriarch in the desert, bolstering the spirits of her people through the long trek in the wilderness. But Miriam was an old woman by this time. I worried about telling this story to young children in a way they could connect. Children relate better to other children. An adult protagonist is a hard sell to young readers in a picture book. So once again, I turned to the midrash. But this time, I

also turned to some more feminist interpretations of the Torah. In the *Five Books of Miriam* by Ellen Frankel, I saw a reference citing Bezalel, the artist of the ark, as the grandchild of Miriam. This excited me and I looked for other sources to corroborate this. Ginzberg did. And The Talmud says Bezalel was only thirteen when God chose him to build the Ark for the Ten Commandments. Bingo! I had a child protagonist, one who could relate the courage and resilience of his beloved grandmother in the desert. In *Miriam in the Desert*, I strove to give young readers, not just a matriarch, but a biblical grandmother whose actions inspired her grandchild and everyone else around her.

“We are Israelites. After crossing the sea and escaping Pharaoh’s armies, we are wandering in the desert with Moses as our leader. There are so many people and animals that I can’t see the end of the line or the beginning. But I can see my grandmother, Miriam. Like a butterfly visiting flowers, she weaves in and out, comforting everyone.”—from *Miriam in the Desert*

Exodus 15:20 calls Miriam a prophetess at the Red Sea, when she takes the timbrel in her hand and praises God with song. At this point, she is an adult. But the midrash says she was a prophetess, even as a child. It says she convinced her parents to re-marry because she knew they would bear a son who would redeem the Israelites. In *Miriam in the Desert*, I emphasized her role as a prophetess. She took a timbrel with her when she left Egypt, because she was confident she would have reason to praise God in the wilderness. While the Torah only describes her singing at the Red Sea, I imagined her continuing to praise God each time they witness another miracle in the desert. How could she not? Miriam was a woman of great courage and great faith. She is one of the few named women in the Bible. Miriam’s Well, the sieve-like rock, spouting a fountain of water was given to the people as a reward for Miriam’s devotion. When Miriam died, the well dried up. How could such a woman not lead her people in praise of God over and

over again? But choosing a child-friendly chorus to sing at different intervals throughout the book was no easy task. My editors and I went through dozens of them before we finally decided on “Miracles, miracles, praise God’s might. We see miracles, day and night.” This chorus highlights what I found so compelling about the years in the wilderness. The manna, the well, the pillar of fire by night, the pillar of clouds leading them by day—it was a time of one miracle after another. My research into the Israelites’ years in the wilderness awed and humbled me. Not only, did I write about it in *Miriam in the Desert*, I wrote some poems on the subject, I’d like to share with you now.

#### MANNA IN THE MORNING

by Jacqueline Jules

Cook fires,  
clothing scraps,  
animal dung  
have long disappeared  
from the desert.  
But the story remains:  
how the Israelites  
fled Pharoah  
under a spiral  
of swirling white clouds  
as angels swept  
stones and snakes  
from their path.  
For forty years,  
Jews followed Moses  
with manna-filled bellies,  
thirst quenched by  
a wondrous wandering well—  
the same fountain I sipped  
this candle-lit evening  
with honeyed challah  
and roasted chicken.

Carrying dishes to the sink,  
my sandaled feet skip  
on a freshly swept floor,

free of snakes and stones.  
Tonight, Pharoah lies drowned  
behind me  
and I am traveling to Canaan  
under a sheltering white cloud,  
certain of manna in the morning.

## ATYPICAL IN HUMAN HISTORY

by Jacqueline Jules

Like the favorite dish  
a mother cooks all afternoon  
to please her child,  
manna was a special treat  
on each Israelite tongue.  
To some, it tasted like bread.  
For others, it was honey.  
Gathered by hand from the desert,  
it became whatever was desired  
in the exact portion needed.  
No one had too much or too little.  
Atypical in human history—  
food to satisfy all.

Like the different voices  
a father creates  
to enliven bedtime stories,  
the voice at Sinai  
sang from the mountaintop  
in a myriad of notes.  
The same words were sung  
in different melodies  
composed to please  
each pair of waiting ears.  
No two accounts concurred,  
but not one soul doubted another.  
Atypical in human history—  
everyone's faith accepted by all.

As you can tell from the poem above, a midrash that particularly moved me was about the distinct taste of the manna—how it had a unique taste in each Israelite's mouth. This paralleled the midrash about the voice at Sinai—how it was a personal experience for each Israelite at Sinai.

“ . . . I wake to thunder and lightning. Miriam takes my hand, and we follow Moses to the foot of the mountain. Smoke billows amid giant flames. The mountain shudders and shakes. A shofar sounds, growing louder and louder. Even my toes tremble.

Then just as I think my ears will burst, everything grows still. Not one baby cries. Not one sheep bleats. The earth feels as if even the worms below have stopped wiggling.

We hear a voice that comes from the east, the west, the north, the south, above, below—everywhere at once. I feel as if I am being lifted off the ground...

That night, everyone talks about the voice at the mountain.

“It was so strong!” one man says.

“It whispered to me,” a woman says.

“God spoke to each one of us in the way we understood best,” Miriam explains.”—from *Miriam in the Desert*

Miriam is a role model I can only hope to aspire to. I question if I could be as comforting and courageous as Miriam if faced with the difficult circumstances she lived in. But studying her, imagining her in depth, enriched my life.

Role models inspire us. They give us the courage to follow our hearts and pursue our dreams. Torah is full of role models, strong characters who struggle to make the right choices and find spiritual meaning in their lives. While the stories can be complicated and sometimes mature, a focus on the characters themselves can make the Torah accessible to the young readers. Children question just as Abraham did. They have to wait to see their dreams come true, just as Sarah did. Sometimes they have to forgive siblings, just as Joseph did. And many children are fortunate enough to have a wise grandmother like Miriam to learn from. The patriarchs and matriarchs from the Torah provide our children with a wealth of role models they can emulate and admire. We are lucky to have such a rich and resonant tradition to give them.

BIO: Jacqueline Jules is an award-winning children’s author and poet. Her books include *The Hardest Word*, *Once Upon a Shabbos*, *The Princess and the Ziz*, *Clap and Count*, *Abraham’s Search for God*, *Sarah Laughs*, *Benjamin and the Silver Goblet*, *Miriam in the Desert*, and *Goodnight Sh’ma*. She has an MLS from the University of Maryland and has worked as both a synagogue and school librarian. For more information, please visit [www.jacquelinejules.com](http://www.jacquelinejules.com).

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