

## MIGRATIONS OF A TALE: *GERSHON'S MONSTER*

*Eric Kimmel and Jon J Muth*

**Description:** Author Eric A. Kimmel and illustrator Jon J Muth present the evolution of *Gershon's Monster*, the winner of the 2000 Sydney Taylor Book Award for Younger Readers. This story, one of the earliest tales of the Ba'al Shem Tov, begins in the same remote region of the Carpathian mountains to which Mr. Kimmel traces his family roots. He will discuss the different sources of the story, including an oral version that has been in the family for 200 years. Using slides, Jon J Muth will show how an artist distills images from text that eloquently capture the spirit of the story. A brief question and answer session will be included.

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Kimmel, Eric A. *Gershon's Monster: A Story for the Jewish New Year*. Retold by Eric A. Kimmel; illustrated by Jon J Muth. New York, Scholastic Press, 2000.

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### Eric Kimmel, Author of *Gershon's Monster*

**Eric A. Kimmel** was born in Brooklyn and now lives in Portland, Oregon with his wife, Doris. He is Professor Emeritus of Education at Portland State University with a fondness for horses, trains, and storytelling. He credits his career as a writer and storyteller to his grandmother, who came from the part of Poland where the Baal Shem began his work. Her version of *Gershon's Monster* was the first he heard. Eric has written at least 65 published books and has several more in progress. The Association of Jewish Libraries honored Dr. Kimmel with a Sydney Taylor award in 1990 for *The Chanukah Guest*, a picture book story illustrated by Giora Carmi. *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins* was both a Sydney Taylor and a Caldecott Honor Book. Among the books of Jewish content that Eric has written for children in addition are: *Nicanor's Gate*, *Hershel of Ostropol*, *The Chanukkah Tree*, *The Spotted Pony*, *Asher and the Capmakers*, *Days of Awe*, *Bar Mitzvah: A Jewish Boy's Coming of Age*, *The Magic Dreidels*, *Onions and Garlic*, *When Mindy Saved Hanukkah*, *Be Not Far from Me: Legends from the Bible*, *A Hanukkah Treasury*, *A Cloak for the Moon*, and *The Jar of Fools*. Through his books, the collective memory of Jewish readers is now acquainted with Hershel Ostropoyler, the Fools of Chelm, a Bialik poem, tales of Rav Nachman of Bratslav, and the Baal Shem Tov.

*Gershon's Monster* is one of the oldest stories I know. It's been a favorite of mine since early childhood. Its roots in our family go deep.

The earliest written version of the story is found in Rabbi Ya'acov Yosef of Polonnoye's *Shivhei ha-Besht*, the first collection of Hasidic tales. *Shivhei ha-Besht* (In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov) is the main source for most of our traditions about Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov.

These stories have always had special meaning to me since my mother's family comes from the part of Galicia where the Baal Shem began his mission. He worked as a charcoal maker in the Carpathian mountains, the same mountains where my grandparents played as children. He revealed himself in the town of Kutu, a hamlet only a few miles down the road from Kolomea, my grandmother's home town.

I'm certain that my ancestors knew the Baal Shem and probably were among the first to hear his message. Apparently, they weren't convinced. My family lived in the Hasidic heartland within walking distance of several great rebbes. Yet there is no tradition—at least

as far as I have been able to discover—of any of my relatives having any connection with Hasidism. They remained stubbornly misnagdik for one hundred and fifty years.

Grandma told me a version of this story which may have come from Rabbi Ya'acov Yosef's book or which may have been circulating independently in the region as an oral tale. Gershon confronts the monster at the seashore, throwing himself between his children and the monster. In all other versions of the story, Gershon suddenly remembers the rebbe's warning. He locks his children in a closet on the day of doom and keeps them there all day. The monster rises from the sea, but finding no children to devour, returns to the depths.

I encountered the story a second time in Hebrew school, at the East Midwood Jewish Center in Brooklyn, New York, where I received the excellent Jewish education that has been foundation of most of my writing. Our teachers spent a great deal of time introducing us to Jewish history and folklore. My classmates and I loved hearing stories about wonder rabbis and how they worked miracles.

I devoured the Jewish storybooks in the school library. One of my favorites was Meyer Levin's *Classic Hasidic Tales*, which, I discovered, also contained a version of the Monster tale.

*Gershon's Monster* remained with me for years. When I worked as a storyteller in parks and libraries, I used it as one of my two signature tales. The other one was *Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock*, which became one of my most successful books.

*Anansi and the Moss-Covered Rock* was followed by *Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins*. My editor, Margery Cuyler, was eager for anything I might care to send her. I thought the time was right for *Gershon's Monster*. I wrote out a draft of the story and submitted it.

Margery hated it. I can understand why. I had warm, fuzzy feelings toward the story since I had so many memories pleasant childhood memories of having had it told to me by people I loved. Someone encountering the story as an adult would definitely find it disconcerting; especially the idea of God punishing a sinner by sending a monster to swallow his children.

It was a hard story to sell. After Margery turned it down, I sent it to various editors without much luck. I began to think there were only two people in the world who liked it. I was one; the other was my agent, Sharon Friedman. Sharon, the Orthodox superwoman, was determined to get *Gershon's Monster* into print.

Our break came with Dianne Hess at Scholastic. Dianne is a kindred spirit, a great editor who loves Jewish stories and has published many outstanding ones. Dianne grabbed the story at the first opportunity. Then the real work began.

Issues that pose no problem for nineteenth century Hasidim raise definite concerns in a book intended for twenty-first century children. Did we mean to imply that childless couples are cursed by God? Is the inability to have children a punishment for sins? Does God kill children because of their parents' misdeeds? The story's heavy emphasis on sin and punishment was certainly an issue.

Dianne wanted to lighten the story. She urged me to replace the word “sins,” which pounded like a hammer on an anvil in nearly every sentence, with milder circumlocutions: “misdeeds,” “thoughtless acts.” I resisted at first, although I eventually came around to Dianne’s way of thinking. The emphasis on sin and punishment makes for a very stern story. Softening this quality allows room for the themes of repentance and redemption to take over.

This changes the story completely. Gershon isn’t wicked; he’s foolish. He can change. God wants him to change. God is on Gershon’s side. God wants to save the children, but Gershon must take the first step. He must break out of his hard shell and acknowledge for the first time in his life that he has been wrong.

This gave me a different perspective on the story, one that I liked very much. Dianne and I spent months working on the text, discussing nearly every word, checking with various rabbis to make sure we were presenting an accurate view of sin, repentance, and redemption in the Jewish religion.

And then my job was done. It was time to find an artist. Dianne sent me samples of Jon J Muth’s work. She didn’t have to convince me. I knew the illustrations Jon had created for Karen Hess’s *Come On, Rain*. If Jon could create anything as memorable as that for me, *Gershon’s Monster* was going to become an important book.

Jon can tell you the rest.

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### Jon J Muth, Illustrator of *Gershon’s Monster*

**Jon J Muth** is an artist and graphic novelist, who was born and grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. When in his early twenties, he moved to New York to study with painter/illustrator, Jeffrey Jones, and later to Vienna to study the artists of the Viennese Secession. He has traveled extensively to explore the ways people live and to see their art: Sculpture and gardens and tea in Japan. paintings, prints and drawings in Austria and England, and dancing in Argentina. Jon has written and drawn award-winning comic books, which have been published both in the United States and Canada. One, called *Imaginary Magnitude*, is based on his relationship with his son, Nikolai. Jon’s illustrations range from an easy reader about Batman to a graphic novel entitled *Dracula: a Symphony in Moonlight and Nightmares*, written and illustrated by Jon after Bram Stoker’s famous work. Jon’s previous book, *Come On Rain!*, written by Karen Hesse (also a Sydney Taylor Award winner), won a Gold Medal from the Society of Illustrators in 1999. Jon dedicated *Gershon’s Monster* to Allen Spiegel, because he was the model for Gershon.

The drawings for *Gershon’s Monster* began as a reaction to the feeling of the script. Eric’s text didn’t describe people or scenes exactly, but the way everything looked was implicit in the way people spoke or reacted to each other. His writing is brilliant. From the first reading it was all very vivid in my mind.

[Compilers’ Comment: Jon J Muth presented a slide show with commentary on all of the illustrations from *Gershon’s Monster*. His comments are here together with three of the illustrations.]

Dedication/page 1: I started with this scene because I wanted to suggest a journey. I wanted you to be coming to Constansa from across the sea.

2: Here we first see Gershon. Gershon was modeled by my friend Allen Spiegel. I’ve been drawing Allen for about 20 years and I am beginning to get him right.



3: The Sins. I wanted to find a way of making the little sins something we could all relate to—a visual equivalent for littering or gossiping. If we laughed at them, we would make them our own—we would understand them. If I could solve this I knew the book would work.



[cover illustration]

4: Gershon carrying his sins to the sea.

5: Gershon and Fayga: Childless. The emotional climate of a scene like this is often difficult. I did this page several times before I felt I had it right. I often do three or even four finished versions of a page before I am satisfied.

6: Gershon being his selfish self. It is a storytelling decision whether to show the action right before what happens in the text, during, or what happens right after. I chose here to show the action right after.

7: Gershon barging in on the Tzaddik.

8: The Tzaddik in deep meditation.

9: The Tzaddik's decree that Gershon should accept God's judgment.

10: The Tzaddik knew he wouldn't listen. Sometimes the pictures are just pauses—places where I try not to get into Eric's way.

11-12: The Children are born: Joseph and Sarah. My children model for many of my pictures. Especially in children's books. If you know me you are likely to be recruited as a model at some point. My son is considering making me pay him. I told him he was conscripted.



13: The sins still tear at our Gershon.

14: Again we see Gershon unrepentant and his sack seems heavier to me here.

15-16: I was aiming for a lot of heat in these pages here—warmth—the kind of heat that is almost dizzying.

17: Gershon remembering the Tzaddik's prophecy.

18: Gershon running down to the beach. I have him going right to left. This is contrary to the way we read and it would usually be thought to impede the story to have him visually going against the flow but I wanted him to be going back into his life—back against time—to try and change things.

19-20: He makes it to the beach but the children can't hear him.

21-22: The Monster created by Gershon's misdeeds.

23: Gershon's attempt to offer himself to the monster in the place of his children.

24: This page is the precise reason I have used watercolor—the monster dissolves into a mist.

25: As Gershon returns to his best self—his T'Shuvah.

Illustrations by Jon J Muth from *Gershon's Monster* by Eric A. Kimmel.

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