

Introduction □

When faced with a particularly weighty problem, the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidic Judaism, would go to a certain place in the woods, light a sacred fire, and pray. In this way, he found insight into his dilemma. His successor, Rabbi Dov Ber, the Preacher of Mezritch, followed his example and went to the same place in the woods and said, “The fire we can no longer light, but we can still say the prayer.” And he, too, found what he needed. Another generation passed, and Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov went to the woods and said, “The fire we can no longer light, the prayer we no longer remember; all we know is the place in the woods, and that will have to suffice.” And it did. In the fourth generation, Rabbi Israel of Rishin stayed at home and said, “The fire we can no longer light, the prayer we no longer know, nor do we remember the place. All we can do is tell the tale.” And that, too, proved sufficient.

But why? Why is it that telling the story carries the same healing power as the original act? Because the story recreates the act in such a way as to invite us into it. We don’t simply listen to a story; we become the story. The very act of giving our attention to the story gives the story a personal immediacy that erases the boundary between the story and ourselves.

Although the power of the story to engage the listener is not unique to Jews, it is explicit in Judaism. Each spring at the Passover seder, a storied re-creation of the Exodus from Egypt, participants are urged to tell the tale as if they themselves were experiencing the events right there in their own homes. The Passover story is not a recounting of what happened once upon a time; it is a “live broadcast” spoken by observers “embedded” in the events themselves.

Storytelling, far more than sacrifice and law, is at the heart of Judaism. Rashi (an acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchak), the famous eleventh-century Jewish sage, asks in his commentary on the Torah why Torah doesn't begin with the revelation at Sinai but instead begins with and includes the tales of creation, Cain and Abel, the Tower of Babel, and the legends of Abraham. Rashi answers that this is done to make it clear that God is the God of all creation and can do with it as God sees fit. But there is a less theological reason that I find far more convincing. If the Bible focused on law and commandments rather than embedding them in drama and storytelling, it would be much more difficult to get people to read it. It is the story that carries the law, not the law that carries the story.

Humans are storytelling animals. From the moment we awake to the moment we go to sleep, our primary means of communication is the story. Our stories define us, instruct us, create us. Without our stories, we do not exist, as the sad plight of amnesia sufferers makes so very clear. For us, our story is our self.

When you see friends on Monday morning and someone asks you what you did over the weekend, you don't pull out your Palm Pilot or Pocket PC and read the appointments listed in your calendar. You tell a story: "Sunday morning started out normal enough, but on my way to the grocery store there was this incredible car accident, and I rushed over to help. You won't believe who was in the car...." The same is true when you meet with family or friends at the end of a day and relate what happened at home, work, or school. Unless you are a teenager talking to an adult, the answer to "What did you do today?" is rarely "Nothing." You tell a story. And the story you tell determines the meaning you derive from the events of your life.

The quality of our lives depends to a great degree on the kinds of stories we tell. Miserable people tend to tell stories of woe; joyous people tend to tell stories of hope. The question we must ask is this: Do our tales reflect the personality of the teller, or do they create it? Does the tale mirror the teller, or does the teller come to resemble the tale?

The safest answer, of course, is that it is a bit of both. But my own experience as a congregational rabbi and professional storyteller is that the tale has greater power than the teller. This is why so many of the great spiritual teachers told stories. These are the great parables, the Zen *koan*, and the teaching tales of the world's wisdom traditions. Listening to these tales with full attention lifts us out of our own story and reveals an alternative drama that may offer us a greater sense of meaning than any of the tales we tell ourselves.

These tales shift our attention from the mundane to the holy while leaving us firmly grounded in the ordinary realities of our everyday lives. The most powerful teaching tales never take us out of the world but plant us more deeply in it. While often dealing with matters of the spirit, they continually ground us in the facts of daily living, for heaven and earth, nirvana and samsara, this world and the World to Come are simply different ways of experiencing the singular reality of this very moment. And that is what great stories do: They show us a different way to engage reality. Nothing changes but our minds, and this, of course, changes everything.

The stories I have collected were not chosen at random. They were not chosen to give you a sense of Hasidic life and teaching. They were not chosen to teach you about anything at all. They were chosen because when you listen to them carefully they will no longer be Hasidic stories; they will be your stories. They will no longer be about long-dead saints and sages; they will be about you. And when you hear what the story has to say about you, your life, and how best to live it, the story will have fulfilled its mission.

Although each of the stories in this small collection has been printed in various Hebrew collections of Hasidic tales and teachings, they were all originally oral tales. My versions of these tales are not literal translations from the Hebrew; to translate literally would have left you with sentences but no story. Stories such as these should not be translated but retold, and that is what I have attempted to do.

My goal is to tell these stories to you as they were told to me, and as I have told them over the past few decades. I have tried to retain both the easy flow of oral literature and the *yiddische tam*, the Eastern European flavor these stories carry. To manage the former, I often created dialogue where the sources offered only description. Dialogue slows the telling, heightens the drama, and allows us to learn the point along with the protagonists.

Regarding the latter, I chose to use the Ashkenazi (Eastern European) pronunciation of Hebrew rather than the now standard Sephardic (Spanish and Oriental) because these tales were originally told in Yiddish with Ashkenazi Hebrew insertions, and I wanted to pass on some of that flavor to you. The primary difference between the two is the use of a "t" sound in Sephardi Hebrew where the Ashkenazi prefers an "s." Thus, you will read about *Shabbos* rather than *Shabbat*, and *mitzvos* rather than *mitzvot* (commandments).

In addition to the annotations that go with each story, I have added my own commentary. This is drawn from my work as a spiritual guide. When people come to me to explore the intricacies of the spirit, I often share with them many of the stories in this book, adding comments similar to those that now accompany the stories as they appear here. I have chosen to include these commentaries to ensure that this book is not simply another collection of Hasidic tales but also a teaching text that you can use to further your own spiritual awakening. These are universal teaching tales told *through* a particular people of a particular faith at a particular time. Not only are these tales about wonder-working rabbis, their passionate disciples, and the laypeople who loved them, but they are also about your life and how you are to live it. Think of these stories not as texts to be studied but as the spiritual diary of an intimate friend who invites you to experience the world as she does by sharing with you the world she experiences.

I offer these tales to you as I have offered them to thousands of people throughout the past thirty years of my life as a storyteller and

rabbi: as fingers pointing to the simple truth of living in the Presence of God. May you read and share these stories with an open heart so that they may do their work and reveal the glory of God and the challenge of godliness present here and now.

- 1 Align our souls with God: The relationship between God and soul is analogous to that between the sun and its rays. We are the extension of God in time and space. How, then, can we be misaligned with God? Misalignment is a state of mind that arises when we forget our true relationship with God and act as if God were other.
- 2 Lift up the heavens: Can heaven fall that it need be “lifted up”? No. Heaven and earth, up and down, go with each other. What falls is a veil of ignorance that blinds us from seeing the truth. When the veil is lifted, it appears to us that heaven is lifted, but in fact it is as it always was.
- 3 *Mechilta*: An ancient rabbinic commentary on the Book of Exodus.
- 4 *HaShem*: The Name, *Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay*, the four-letter Name of God, which is said to convey the essence of the Divine. Unpronounceable both in fact and in theory, the letters are a word play on the Hebrew verb “to be.” God is That Which Is, Was, and Will Be. God is not “a being” or even “the supreme being” but rather Being Itself.
- 5 Exodus 20:13.
- 6 Genesis 4:9.
- 7 In the Book of Exodus 3:14, God reveals the essence of divinity to Moses: *ehyeh asher ehyeh*, most often translated as “I AM what I AM.” A more accurate Hebrew translation would be “I will be whatever I will be.” In either case, the Hasidic understanding of the text is the same: God is all that is. God is all that is happening at every moment. God is I AM—not a being or even a supreme being, but Being Itself. That means God is Cain, Abel, you, and me. This is what Reb Avraham means when he speaks of each as being a keeper of the I AM; just as a wave is a “keeper of” the ocean in its particular place and time, so are you a keeper of God in your particular place and time. To realize this about yourself is to realize it about all beings. It is to achieve this realization that you were born and blessed with life.

□ Why Are You Here?

Reb Avraham of Parisov told this story:

Once I was present when Reb Yaakov Aryeh of Radzymin visited Reb Menachem Mendel of Kotsk. As Reb Yaakov entered the room, the rebbe turned to his guest and shouted: "Yaakov! In a few words tell me: Why are there humans in this world?"

Without hesitation, Reb Yaakov said: "We come into this world to align our souls with God."¹

The Kotsker exclaimed: "Nonsense! Why are we here? We are here to lift up the heavens!"²

Not content with either answer, Reb Avraham would add his own understanding, saying:

"In fact, both sages are correct. We humans are here to align with God and in so doing to uplift the heavens. We know this from the *Mechilta*,³ which teaches that the first five of the Ten Commandments parallel the second five. Thus, 'I am *HaShem*'⁴ goes with 'Do not murder.'⁵ To kill a human being is to diminish our capacity to bring godliness into the world.

"Thus, when God asks Cain after Cain had murdered his brother, Abel, 'Where is Abel?' Cain answers, 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?'⁶ We should understand Cain to be saying, 'I did not know that my brother was a keeper of I AM,⁷ God; I did not know that by killing my brother I was weakening the influence of the divine I AM in this world.'"

1 Forty days: According to Jewish tradition, forty days is the amount of time one needs to free oneself from unwanted habits and instill desired habits in their place.

2 Baal Shem Tov (1698–1760): Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer was the founder of Hasidism. He began his public teaching in 1734 and soon earned the title Baal Shem Tov, Master of the Good Name (of God). He was an authentic healer of hearts, minds, and souls.

3 *Tehillim*: Psalms.

Ⓢ You are what you say. The quality of your speech reflects the quality of your soul. Idle speech is thoughtless chatter, suggesting a scattered mind. If you wish to improve the latter, improve the former. But this effort must include all the words you use. Whether written, signed, spoken, or sung, a word has the power to heal or to harm. The problem with the fellow in our story is that he made a distinction between prayer and speech. It is all words, and no word should be spoken without full attention.

The Baal Shem Tov taught that a person is born with a fixed number of words to speak; when they are spoken, the person dies. Imagine that this is true for you. Every word you speak brings you closer to death. The next time you are about to utter a word, ask yourself whether this word is worth dying for.

□ Idle Speech

A man once came across a teaching that said if you refrain from idle conversation for forty days¹ you will receive divine inspiration. Thinking this to be a shortcut to God, he set his mind to the task with great diligence. Forty days passed, and not once did an idle word cross his lips. And yet, at the end of his struggle, no inspiration was granted him. Seeking an explanation, he traveled to the Baal Shem Tov.²

After listening to the man's story, the Baal Shem Tov asked, "Did you pray during those forty days?"

"What a question!" the man exclaimed. "Of course I prayed. Three times a day I prayed, just as we are commanded by God."

"I see," said the Baal Shem Tov. "And did you read any *Tehillim*?"³

"Again, such a question! I am a Jew, and therefore I read Psalms every day." And to emphasize his point the man rattled off the first verses of his favorite psalm. "Master," he continued after the recitation, "can it be that the teaching is wrong? Can it be that after forty days of prayer and psalms and abstaining from idle conversation one does not receive divine inspiration?"

"No," said the Baal Shem Tov. "The teaching is true. It was your practice that was faulty. I can tell from your recitation of the psalm that while you took care to uplift your conversations, you babbled your prayers. They became your idle speech. You purified your conversation with people and defiled your conversation with God. Your prayers themselves kept you from receiving inspiration from God."