

9-1-1994

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Recommended Citation

Frankel, Ellen. 1994. "Legend in Jewish Children's Literature." *Judaica Librarianship* 8: 97-99. doi:10.14263/2330-2976.1239.

Legend in Jewish Children's Literature*

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Abstract: Until recent times, Jewish children's legends did not exist as a separate literature. Children learned stories either from classical Jewish sources, family members, or traveling storytellers.

Recent interest in and publication of Jewish children's stories represent both a boon and a danger. Contemporary versions of traditional tales blur the distinctions between fiction and folklore, challenging the inherent conservatism of the folk process.

What makes a particular story Jewish? Jewish tales attempt to find meaning and divine purpose in national and personal events. They also resonate with old voices—"proof-texts" from the Bible and rabbinic writings—as well as new voices continuing ancient conversations and debates. The tales are often driven by the process of midrash, amplifying and interpreting older narratives.

The subject matter of Jewish legends has changed in the wake of national exile and persecution. Post-exilic tales reflect the "double-edged" experience of Jewish life—the triumph of Jewish wit and the shame of Jewish powerlessness. Today's tales continue this tradition but add to the folkloric process the new element of individual authorship.

Legend vs. Fiction

Until recent times, there did not exist a separate literature of Jewish children's legends. Children learned such material either directly from the Biblical, Talmudic and Midrashic sources that they studied

in school or synagogue, from family members, or from hearing the *maggid* (itinerant storyteller) tell tales to the community.

The contemporary interest in and production of Jewish children's legends in book and audio form represent both a boon and a danger. On the one hand, Jewish children now have remarkable access to traditional stories, often beautifully illustrated, that are tailored specifically to their intellectual needs and capacities. And such legends can even travel outside the Jewish world into the international library of story lore.

There is, however, a danger inherent in this process: as traditional legends undergo continuous recasting and simplification on the way to becoming *children's stories*, there is a blurring of distinctions between the original text and the teller's *midrash* (commentary and interpretation). Although midrash has long been a vital process in the evolution of Jewish literature, its effects have been tempered by time, shared communal values, and the inherent *conservatism* of the folk process. When commercial and Jewish presses publish "new" children's legends by individual writers answering only to their own imaginations, this evolutionary process turns *legend* into *fiction*. Is this change "bad" for the Jews? Not necessarily—but it profoundly affects the way that traditional Jewish legends are transmitted and preserved. Parents, teachers, librarians, and children could benefit from studying how this modern interpretive process interacts with ancient texts.

What Makes a Story Jewish?

What characterizes *Jewish* stories? Are our stories any different from the Arabian Nights, the Indian Panchatantra, or the works of the Brothers Grimm? Have we in our stories, if nowhere else, attained the early Zionists' dream: to be a nation like all other nations—to tell the same stories?

But we are not like other nations. Our stories, taken as a whole, are different in the

same way that our way of life is different. Abraham and Sarah were told to "go forth," to leave home and go on a quest as any hero must, but not to seek treasure or fame or beauty or power, but to seek God in themselves and among strangers. And so we have continued, to this day. And wherever we have gone, we have told stories about our journey.

Perhaps Abraham became the first Jew because he loved to tell certain kinds of stories: about all things being connected; about unity and pattern and purpose; about a single spirit infusing the world with meaning. He was not the first storyteller; no, his world already abounded with tales, of the Mesopotamian gods Marduk and Tiamat, of Utnapishtim the ark-builder and Gilgamesh the wanderer, of floods and heavenly strife and human strivings—but Abraham saw a different world than did his neighbors. Where they saw cruel gods and capricious fate, he saw design. Where they saw the rule of power, he saw covenant and accountability. Where they saw the wheel of fortune, he saw history.

And he told stories that reflected that vision: the Creation and its majestic order; the Tree of Knowledge and its challenge to humanity; the Flood and its promise for the future. The tales he told were new to his neighbors' ears. Perhaps they seemed laughable or even threatening. What folly to have faith in such intangible divinity! Fairy tales whose plots humanity helps shape. Absurd! Dangerous!

But Abraham and Sarah had faith nonetheless and continued to tell stories. And Abraham told Ishmael the stories, but somehow they made no sense to him. For Ishmael was a man of action, a hunter, a wild ass of a man who preferred to read the lessons the land taught him instead of the lessons of an invisible God. So Abraham told his tales to Isaac. And this son listened, and promised to pass them on.

Thus was born history—*toldot* in Hebrew (literally, "generations"): stories transmitted from parent to child; a different kind of history from that which we moderns

Based on a presentation for the panel, "God, Midrash, and Legend in Jewish Children's Literature" (with Marc Gellman and Barbara Diamond Goldin), at the 28th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries, New York, June 22, 1993.

understand, and yet every bit as true as the stories of Herodotus and Gibbon. Perhaps even truer.

We are Jews today because of those stories. Though life often seems to lack meaning, we make up stories to wrest meaning out of the absurd and unjust vicissitudes of our lot. That is the basic impulse of the Jewish tale: to make sense out of the things that happen to us, as individuals and as a people. And to tell these stories takes as much faith as to believe in one God, for they are essentially the same thing.

The rabbis of the Talmud also talked among themselves and with their predecessors, embellishing the old stories to teach or to prove or to persuade or simply to delight each other and future listeners. These embellishments constitute a genre of storytelling called midrash.

It has often been said that the number of plots available to a storyteller is limited. But oh, the infinite permutations to these plots!

It is precisely these permutations that make a national body of tales unique. Although the human condition is universal, each people has to weave its own national costume out of the tangled skein of its particular experiences. And though we Jews have lived almost everywhere and spoken almost every tongue, we have our own distinct voice that resonates in our tales, sometimes only faintly, sometimes with the clarity of a shofar blast.

Often, it is an old voice that speaks in a Jewish tale. These ancient echoes are brought back to life through the device of *proof-texts*, words and phrases quoted from previous speakers, usually Biblical, who lend their sacred authority to a new teller's words and so make listeners more willing to lend an ear. Proof-texts do more than lend authority, however; they also

lend pattern to a tale, bringing it into the Golden Chain, *shalsholet ha-zahav* in Hebrew, *goldene keyt* in Yiddish, the unbroken strand stretching between the generations.

But there are new voices, too. In fact, our written and oral traditions are nothing more—nor less—than an interminable conversation among the generations. The Prophets consulted their elders, centuries dead, for guidance about the new generations who had forgotten the old stories. And they invented new tales, some horrific, others consoling, to address the new challenges facing their people.

The rabbis of the Talmud also talked among themselves and with their predecessors, embellishing the old stories to teach or to prove or to persuade or simply to delight each other and future listeners. These embellishments constitute a genre of storytelling called *midrash* (from the Hebrew verb "to search out"), a process of reading between the lines of the Biblical text to fill in the missing stories. The rabbi never asked themselves *why* a particular story might have been left out; they simply assumed that the earlier tellers deliberately left room for future stories, as a prudent gardener leaves room between new seedlings for future growth.

And so, the rabbinic sages "invented" the story of Abraham smashing his father's idols, a tale not found anywhere in the Biblical text. Why? Because they perceived that the Bible began Abraham's story too late, with God's command to leave Ur: "Go forth from your native land and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Why, asked these later readers, did Abraham have to leave his home? What did he do to merit such an uprooting? To answer these questions, they imagined a young man in the throes of religious doubt, challenging his entire culture with the revolutionary idea of a single, invisible God. They imagined him at home, the child of an idolmaker, caught between filial devotion and the undeniable call of faith. Out of this imaginative reconstruction came the tale of a rebellion, a conversion—his entire family's as well as many strangers'—and a voluntary exile from all he knew. Did the rabbis make this story up out of whole cloth? Yes. But also no. The seeds were there; they grew from roots planted firmly in the sacred text.

Many of the tales so familiar to us derive from this midrashic process: the baby Moses choosing a burning coal over Pharaoh's crown and certain death; God

unsuccessfully peddling the Torah to the other nations until Israel finally accepts it; David's life spared by a spider and a wasp; Solomon flying on his magic carpet in search of new and greater wisdom. Ask most Jewish children to tell you a Bible story, and chances are that many of them will tell you the midrash about Abraham and his clever trick with his father's idols. They know—as many adult Bible scholars do not—that all these stories are an inseparable part of the Torah, whether they were given voice at Sinai or at Yavneh or in the study-houses of Europe. As our tradition teaches, the Torah is a tree of life to all who hold fast to it—and healthy trees must grow and bear fruit.

Subject Matter of Jewish Stories

The first Jewish legends naturally speak of origins—how the world began, the creation of monsters and miracles, the alphabet and humankind; then of families—their quarrels and reconciliations, their births, marriages, and deaths; then of national matters—how a people is forged by slavery and tempered by the wilderness, how a nation takes possession of its land and negotiates its covenant with God.

Such early tales are common to most peoples. Every national folklore begins at the beginning and introduces its ancestors to later generations. Such first heroes always stand larger than life, even if some have feet of clay. They are our models and our goads, the golden molds to our tin coins. They contend with giants and spirits, maintain a special relationship with the heavens, die gloriously.

But something happens to Jewish heroes in the wake of national exile, first at the hand of Babylonia in 586 B.C.E. and then again in 70 C.E. at the hand of Rome. No longer do our stories glorify our own power, for we have become powerless. No longer do we people our tales with Jewish kings, for we are now the subjects of other crowns. No longer do our heroes talk directly to God, for the heavens have barred their gates, at least the front ones. Now they must take the long way around.

And so beginning with Talmudic tales set in the period following the Roman conquest, Jewish stories take on a different cast. The vision embodied within them is now profoundly religious and moral, addressing the problem most challenging to all religious systems: theodicy—God's justice in the world. With rare exception these tales vindicate God's role in human affairs, arguing for the triumph of good

over evil, for the ultimate just recompense of sinner and saint, for the redemptive power of charity. Instead of stating their message explicitly, they *dramatize* the value system embodied in the Jewish tradition: study, worship, and deeds of loving-kindness. The heroes in these tales are spiritual giants; their adversaries, the monsters called Lust and Greed and Vanity and Moral Arrogance. And there are small nameless heroes, too, those whose deeds might save only a single soul, perhaps only themselves. But as the tradition teaches: One who saves a single life is to be regarded as having saved the whole world.

Perhaps the most significant feature in these later tales, which span 2,000 years and dozens of countries, is their sense of irony. In the days of the Bible, God was a partner in every plot, if not the main actor. If Moses triumphed over Pharaoh, it was only because God orchestrated the grand opera of the Exodus. If Joshua or Deborah or David or Elijah mastered their enemies, it was only because God fulfilled their prophecies.

But what of Rabbi Akiva emerging from the mystical orchard unscathed, or Yohanan smuggled to Vespasian in a coffin and bargaining for Yavneh, or the Maharal of Prague outwitting Israel's enemies with the Golem, an automaton fashioned out of mud and magic? Although God is obviously behind these scenes, it is now human wisdom and cunning that take center stage. For without a land, without the covenant bound up with the land, the Jew must now live by his wits. And irony is wit's sharpest weapon, with a two-sided blade capable of piercing enemies both without—the Hamans and the Czars—and within, our own self-delusion and hubris. Thus, in addition to tales of the Jews' ironic triumphs over Greece, over Rome, over European princes, we also have stories of failure—sexual trespass, intellectual conceit, spiritual arrogance, the foolishness of Chelm.

It is precisely this double-edged vision that has been the secret to our survival. For without the self-aggrandizement made possible through ironic narrative, we could not have held up our heads all

these centuries in a world that so often despised us; yet without the self-criticism made possible through an irony turned against ourselves, we would not have remained faithful to a Power beyond our own wits.

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For almost 4,000 years, we have been both the teller and the tale, acting all the parts assigned us, while at the same time narrating the play. Ours has been one of history's grandest roles but also one of its most exacting. And the final curtain has yet to fall. It cannot, for the last player has yet to strut the boards. When that scene comes, the Story comes to an end.

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Adapted from the Introduction to The Classic Tales: 4000 Years of Jewish Lore (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1989).

Ellen Frankel serves as Editor-in-Chief at the Jewish Publication Society, a position she held formerly at the B'nai B'rith Jewish Book Club. Dr. Frankel has been Judaic principal of a Jewish day school, has published in national Jewish periodicals and written books for children, young adults and adults—most recently The Classic Tales: 4000 Years of Jewish Lore (Jason Aronson, 1989) and The Encyclopedia of Jewish Symbols (Jason Aronson, 1992). She has also taught writing programs at several universities in New Jersey. She holds a Ph.D. from Princeton University.