

LITERARY THEMES

Noah and the Great Flood: The Metamorphosis of the Biblical Tale*

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Noah in Children's Books

The Biblical account of Noah and the Flood is a complex story that has been simplified in all the children's versions of it, either by leaving out details or by changing the story itself. In many books, it has become a story about animals. Some books exclude everything else, even Noah. Some books leave Noah in, and leave out his family. Some leave God out, or replace Him with a radio that tells Noah about the coming Flood. Many books do not refer to a corrupt generation, and so offer no reason for the Flood. Several books describe the journey in the ark as a pleasure cruise with beer-drinking and tea parties. No wonder the animals are reluctant to leave the ark.

There is no question that these versions are amusing. I find the illustrations to many of them especially imaginative and original. To mention only a few, Maud and Miska Petersham's *The Ark Of Father Noah And Mother Noah* (Doubleday, 1934) is charming, retold from the perspective of a child. Peter Spier's illustrations to his *Noah's Ark* (Doubleday, 1977) are light-hearted, but very expressive. Lorenz Graham's re-creation of the tale in primitive, Liberian English is captivating, especially if read aloud (*God Wash The World And Start Again*, Crowell, 1946). All these versions repeat the main lines of the tale, but they miss the profound moral lesson of the Biblical story.

A few of these books such as M. B. Goffstein's *My Noah's Ark* (Harper, 1978), are very loosely connected with the Biblical tale, and their message lies somewhere else, not in the Biblical story. In Goffstein's book, the ark is a toy that a grandfather built for his daughter, who is now a grandmother herself—a toy that conveys memories and links generations. In this paper, however, I examine more closely those versions that, at least on the face of it, resemble the Biblical tale.

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Both picture books and illustrated stories present the Biblical tale in terms of the triumph of good over evil. Noah is the good, selfless man who obeys God and takes very good care of animals. And so, when the Flood is over and all the bad people are gone, Noah and his company come out of the ark to begin their new life in a beautiful, clean world—clean physically and morally. Marguerite Haubensak-Tellenback in *The Story of Noah's Ark*, (Crown Publishers, 1977), tells that when the Flood ended, and Noah's family and all the animals came out, "the world they saw now was new again and clean and beautiful." Leon Baxter's ending of his *Noah and the Ark* (Silver Burdett, 1984) is more pastoral in its detail: "The land looked wonderful. It smelled fresh and clean, and tiny plants were springing up from the soil wherever they looked. The family was so happy, they danced and sang, and laughed with pleasure and relief. Their long adventure was over." Was it over, indeed?

The message conveyed by these books is that the wicked get killed, and the good take care of animals and are saved. Neither conclusion is true to life, but the Biblical tale *is* true to life. The story of Noah is not a story of how bad men are killed and good men are saved. It is not a story about a miracle; it also is not a story about animals. This is a story about a man who learns to give, who finds out the hard way about the consequences of selfishness. The Bible, and especially the midrashim on the Biblical story, portray Noah not as a flawless man, but as a man with flaws who lives to recognize them and overcome them so that he can survive. What a lesson for a young reader to learn!

True, it is hard to show the development of a character in a picture book. But the prevailing versions do not satisfy a thoughtful reader or a thoughtful audience. As I was reading several of the picture books to my five-year-old daughter, she did not respond to the pretty pictures of animals or to the elaborate ark. The man on the deck with the long white beard did not stimulate her fancy. But she did want to know why every-

body and everything drowned in the Flood. The total destruction, on the one hand, and the pleasant life in the ark, on the other—as they were portrayed in these books—bothered her.

Older children raise other questions. A junior high school student wanted to know why, if Noah was such a righteous man who walked with God, as the Bible relates, did he accept the destruction of everything, including the entire human race? How come he didn't protest? A high school student wrote in a paper on Noah's Ark: "This is one of the most elitist elements of the Bible. . . . Here God is saying that only one man's family has the right to survive."

The Midrashic View

All these pertinent questions were raised by the midrash, and answered in more than one way. What is common to the midrashim is that they all looked for the valuable lesson in the Biblical narrative that would be relevant not only for Noah's generation, but for their own.

What is a *midrash*? The word *midrash* is derived from the Hebrew verb *darash*—to investigate, to search for the deeper meaning of a text, as distinguished from *pashat*—to simplify, to look for the literal meaning of the text. The noun *derash* uncovers the inner significance of the verse; *peshat* conveys the literal and historical level of the text. In their search for the meaning of the story of Noah and the great Flood, the sages have found in the particular tale a universal message about the role of man in society. In Noah, they see an example of a man who develops from one moral and social stage to the next. Historically, they see Noah as the link between the age of creation—the age of Adam, Eve, Cain, and Abel—when social awareness hardly existed, and the age of civilization—when social awareness and social righteousness became necessary conditions for survival.

The greatest discrepancy between the children's books and the Biblical tale,

particularly as it was expanded in the midrashic tradition, is in the portrayal of Noah. The Biblical tale begins: "Noah was in his generations a man righteous and blameless; Noah walked with God" (*Genesis* 6:9). Several midrashim comment that, according to this verse, only when compared with his corrupt generation did Noah stand out as a righteous man. In Abraham's generation, the midrashim add, Noah would not have been considered a righteous man. To reinforce their reading, the midrashim point out that when God addresses Noah in the next chapter ("for thee have I seen righteous before Me in this generation," *Genesis* 7:1), God repeats the initial verse, except that He omits "blameless" when He addresses Noah, and changes "in his generations a man righteous" to the singular "in this generation," qualifying Noah's righteousness even further.

But then, what about "Noah walked with God"—the second part of the verse that introduces Noah? Here, too, the midrashim find that the text, in effect, belittles Noah. Rashi contrasts Noah, who "walked with God," with Abraham, who "walked before God" (*Genesis* 17:1). "Walking with God" and "walking before God" are two different stages in man's relationship with God. The former is inferior to the latter.

Midrash Rabba (30:10) illuminates the verse with an imaginative example. Noah is like a man sinking in mud. He cannot deliver himself from the mud that sticks to him and to his belongings. He needs help. He needs somebody who is not sinking in the mud with him to come and pull him out. Noah wanted to deliver himself from the corruption of his generation. But he needed God to support him. That is why the Bible tells us, "Noah walked with God" (*Genesis* 6:9). Abraham drew enough strength from his own righteousness; therefore, he did not need God to support him. And so God asked Abraham to go before Him, to carry the light and illuminate the way for everyone else. A Chasidic Midrashist says: "Noah is like copper, Abraham is like gold. Gold is a pure metal; copper is not." (*Sanhedrin* 108a; see also *Genesis Rabba*, 29:3).

Noah's Faults

If Noah was not blameless, what were his faults?

Noah's failing was that he was concerned only about his own righteousness, and did not show concern for the people of his generation. He did not reprove them, nor did he pray for them. Noah neither protested nor asked for mercy when God told

him that they would all drown in the Flood. The midrashim compare Noah's response with Abraham's in a similar situation, when God was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah (*Ha-Zohar*, "Vayera," 106:71). Unlike Noah, Abraham repeatedly protested to God and showed a lot of compassion for the people: "Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Perhaps there are fifty righteous within the city; wilt Thou indeed sweep away and not forgive the place for the fifty righteous that are therein?" (*Genesis* 18:23–33).

Noah had still other flaws. He was lacking in faith. The midrashim tell us that he did not enter the ark until the water reached his knees: "Noah . . . went into the ark because of the waters of the Flood" (*Genesis* 7:7). Rashi amplifies this point in his commentary to this verse. Noah did not think God would actually bring down the Flood that He said he would. Noah also refused to leave the ark after God told him to do so, because he was afraid of another Flood. The midrashim describe Noah as a man who constantly doubts his power, his integrity, and God. But it is these weaknesses that accentuate his humanity.

Why Noah Was Saved

Now that we have recreated the Biblical Noah with all his flaws, the question to ask is: Why was he saved? The answer is that Noah was not saved. He was chosen by God to save himself. That is why God made him build the ark, and build it himself. This emphasis on self-redemption in the interpretation of the tale of the Flood is unique to the Jewish exegetical tradition. The Christian tradition tells, most dramatically in the mystery plays, how Noah's sons—and even their wives—helped build the ark, get food, and get all the animals together. In Muslim tradition, we read about the navigators who steered the boat. Children's books describe how the animals helped build the ark. The midrashim, however, explain that God gave Noah the detailed specifications on how to build the ark, so that he could do it himself. Inside the ark, it would have been simple for God to take care of everything, but that would have contradicted the function of the ark. So we read that the angel Raziel gave Noah the Torah so that he could look there for instructions on how to feed the animals.

The year that Noah spent in the ark, with all the animals to provide for, was intended as a lesson in selflessness, social responsibility, and caring. God specifically tells Noah, "Two of each shall come to you," not to live but "to keep them alive" with you (*Genesis* 6:19–20). "The animals will

come to you, and you will keep them alive by providing for them." The repetition of this injunction in the narrative demonstrates its importance. The world could not have been saved for the sake of the animals alone, or for the sake of Noah and his family. The condition for future survival is selflessness and caring for the other.

This new awareness of the role of man as an unselfish, caring individual takes us from the age of Creation (the beginning of life)—when man is unable to share with other men—to the age of civilization—when man learns to live with other men. The crisis between Cain and Abel was the crisis of selfishness. According to a midrash, Cain told Abel: "The earth is mine and I will not share it with you. Take your animals and get off my earth." (*Bereshit Rabba* 22:7). Cain was unable to live with other men because he would not share. This same selfishness is at the root of the sin *hamas*, the sin committed by the generation of the Flood (*Genesis* 6:11 and 13). *Hamas*, is taking what does not belong to you, including somebody else's wife. The fallen angels committed *hamas*, by taking whenever and whomsoever they chose from the daughters of men. Noah takes mankind out of the generation of *hamas* to a new age, by learning to live justly with other men and animals. In the ark, he learns a lesson in social righteousness. Thus civilization originated in the ark.

The midrashim amplify the idea that the journey in the ark was not a miraculous salvation, but an ordeal with a lesson to be learned from it. Everyone in the ark had to abstain from eating meat. Carnal relations for man and animal were prohibited (see, for example, Rashi's commentary to 7:7 and *Sanhedrin* 108b). The year in the ark, says Rabbi Yehuda in *Matnot Kehunah*, was a year of such suffering and tribulation that it was as if Noah had been dead during that year. This is why the Bible tells us that Noah was 600 years old when he entered the ark, and later that he died at the age of 950, 350 years after he left the ark. The year in the ark is not counted, because Noah was actually 951 years old when he died.

Life in the Ark

There are numerous midrashim that describe the hardships Noah faced in the ark, and the care and compassion he felt for everybody around him. We all know the familiar scene of the animals proceeding into the ark two-by-two. In some children's versions, Noah may be seen standing by the door with a long list, counting the animals. According to the midrashic tradition, Noah stood by the door and decided who would

come in and who would not, according to a certain test that animals had to pass in order to assure proper behavior in the ark. Those that crouched down before Noah by the door were allowed to enter, for this kind of behavior promised submissiveness (see *Pirke Rabi Eliezer*, 23; *Sanhedrin* 108a-b). These midrashim make Noah personally responsible for the quality of future life in the ark and, eventually, outside it. One midrash relates that, along with the animals that Noah accepted into the ark (only as a pair, though) two peculiar creatures came begging for shelter. They were Falsehood and Misfortune, and they found their victims in the ark (Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, v. 1, p. 160–161).

According to a midrash, Og, king of Bashan, was also allowed to enter. When Noah thought his work was done, Ham's wife came to him, falling on her knees. "I have a son," she said. "The giant Og. His father is the monster Hiya, son of Shemhazai, the fallen angel. How can I leave him behind?" "Bring him over," Noah said to her. She brought him over. He was twice as tall as the tallest animal in the ark. Noah couldn't see Og's head when he was looking at him. "He is so big," Noah told Og's mother. "There is no room in the ark for him. But we'll let him sit on the roof of the ark." Og heard this and fell on his knees. He promised Noah that he would be his slave for the rest of his life. For the whole year, Noah fed him through a hole in the roof (*Pirke Rabi Eliezer* 23; *Yalkut Reuveni on Gen.* 7:22).

Noah showed a similar compassion towards the reem, who was too big to enter the ark. Noah tied him to the ark with a rope, and the reem just swam behind it (*Genesis Rabba*, 31:13).

During the whole year that Noah spent in the ark, he never slept, for he had to feed different animals at different times. One day, he was struck by the lion because he was late in feeding him, and consequently Noah became crippled.

Noah did not know what to feed the chameleon. Days went by, and he was afraid the chameleon would die. Then one day, he entered the cabin where the chameleon was lying in a corner. Noah had a pomegranate with him. When he bent down to feed other animals, the pomegranate fell and opened. A worm crept out. When the starving chameleon noticed the worm, it caught it with its tongue and swallowed it. From then on, Noah fed the chameleon worms that were bred in bran (*Pirke Rabi Eliezer*, 23).

The Dove and Noah

The midrashim on the dove beautifully dramatize the intense compassion that Noah felt for another being. Let us examine the text and the commentaries on it: "And he sent out a dove from him . . . and she returned unto him to the ark . . . and he put forth his hand, and took her, and brought her in unto him into the ark" (*Genesis* 8:8–10). The intimate relationship between Noah and the dove stands out in the Biblical text itself, with the repetition of the personal pronouns "him," "her," "his." The midrashim point out that even though the dove's mission failed the first time, she did not go back to her nest, but went instead to Noah, and he took her. The Talmud concludes from "he sent out a dove from him" that the clean birds lived together with Noah and his family in the ark. The tight relationship that Noah had with his surroundings, with the animals, with the elements, and with his family from day to day, provided the setting for his transformation into a caring and compassionate man. The compassion, the concern Noah felt for the dove was something that he did not feel before the Flood, when he failed to protest against the annihilation of all men and animals.

The child who reads the story of Noah, or to whom the story is read, is just at an age when he is beginning to develop social awareness, the need to share, and to take responsibility for others. He could learn an important lesson from this story.

Jewish vs. Muslim Versions

The special moral lesson of the Jewish tale stands out when we compare it with Muslim versions. As an example, I have chosen a 17th-century illustration of Noah's ark, ascribed to Miskin—one of the greatest painters in the Mughal court, who painted during the reign of the Muslim emperor Akbar (see photograph). This narrative picture is based on the Koran version of the tale, and is believed to have illustrated a poem by the Muslim poet Hafiz, in which Noah figured as a character.

The contrast between the presentation of life in the ark in this illustration and in the midrashic tradition is striking. The ark is clearly shaped as a boat with masts and sails. In addition to Noah and his three sons, who are on the third level, there are navigators who navigate the boat. The Jewish ark, in contradistinction, is not a boat, but a *tevah* (box), and it has neither sailors nor navigators to guide it through the waters. On the outside, the Jewish ark is in God's hands. On the inside, it is in Noah's hands.

In the illustration, Noah is withdrawn into himself, meditating. He pays no attention to anything that goes on in the ark, not even to his fourth son, who is drowning because, according to Muslim tradition, he refused to enter the ark. Noah and his sons are completely separated from all the animals that occupy the three other levels. They are on a separate carpeted level.

The illustration visually renders the tale of the Flood as it is narrated in the Koran and in later Muslim commentaries. There, Noah is God's messenger, a precursor of Muhammed, trying to proselytize the non-believers who are eventually punished by God with the Flood. As a prophet, he is separated from mankind, he is an outsider, he is God's man on earth. In contrast, according to Jewish tradition, Noah learns to live justly with the world around him, and he can do this through social interaction.

When Noah finally leaves the ark and sees all the destruction, he cries out. He appeals to God's mercy and God rebukes him, according to several midrashim. "As soon as you heard that you would be rescued in the ark," God says to Noah, "you did not concern yourself with the ruin that would occur on earth." In an unselfish act, then, Noah chooses among the clean animals in his possession—animals that he could have used in the future for domestic purposes—to give them away to God.

But even at this point, we are reminded that Noah is not perfect, and neither is the "new world." Noah cannot perform the services of the sacrifice because he is lame. (Remember the lion that struck Noah because he was late in feeding him?) We are also told that together with him, two other creatures leave the ark—Falsehood and Misfortune. It was Noah who had accepted them into the ark, along with the animals, and now they are back, looking for victims.

The Meaning of the Rainbow

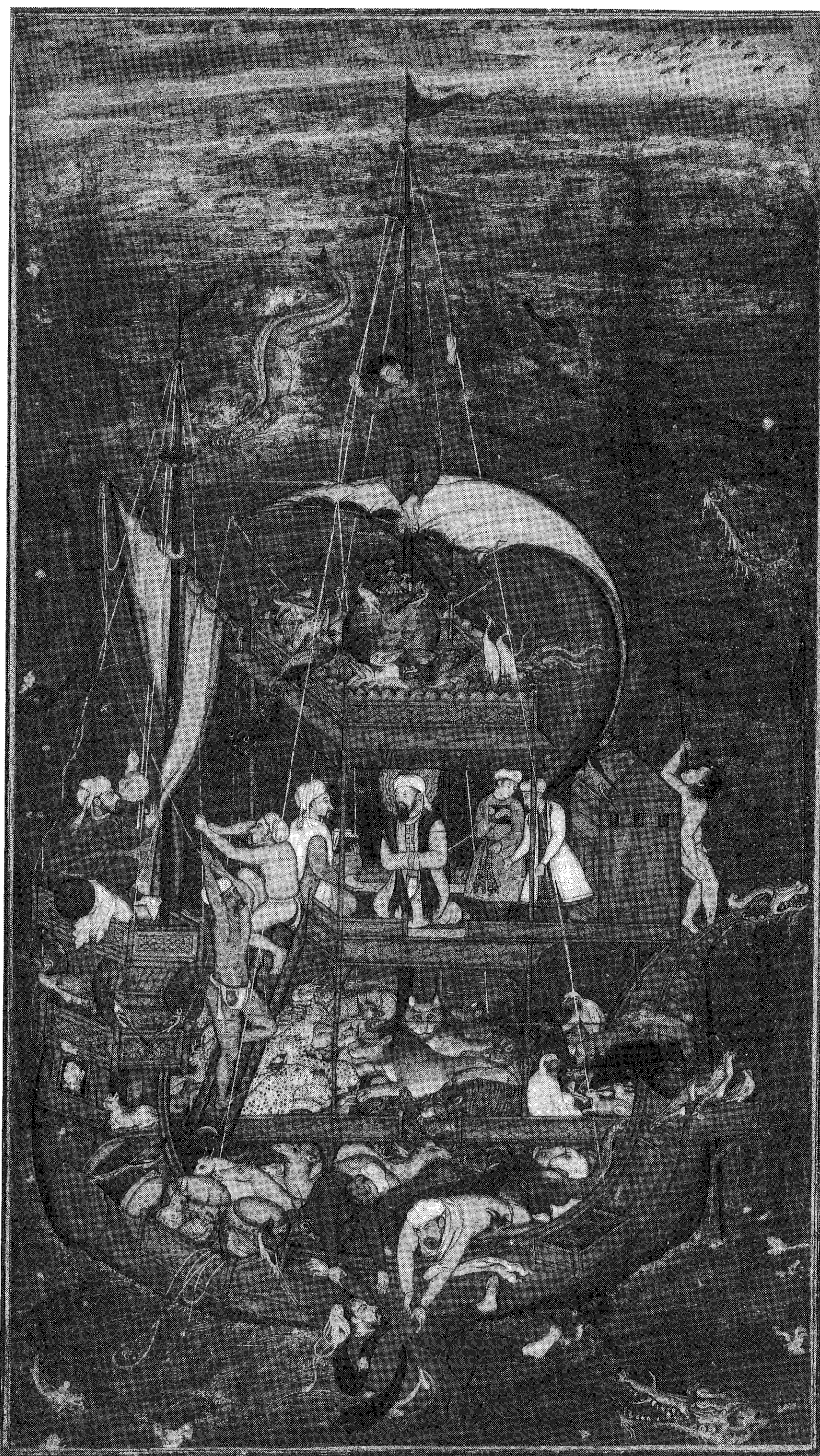
And now we come to the rainbow. The treatment of the rainbow in children's books obscures, perhaps more than anything else, the meaning of the narrative. When a child sees a rainbow at the end of a story, he knows it has a happy ending. A rainbow means all the beautiful things in the world. Almost all the children's books on Noah end with a picture of the rainbow and a text that says something like: "The grass grew and pretty flowers bloomed and the world was beautiful." Or: "Noah gazed at the shining arch and the cleanliness of the world which God had given back to him" (*Noah's Ark*, by Michael Harrison and Christopher Stuart-Clark, Oxford University Press, 1983). But the world was not clean, even after the Flood was over,

and neither was Noah. He would soon be found drunk and naked (according to some midrashim, in his wife's tent).

The Flood did not redeem the world from evil. The narrative about Noah and the ark ends with a stark realization of the limits of man. In His new covenant with man, even as He promised Noah not to bring another flood, God said: "I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake because *man is born with the inclination to do evil*" (*Genesis 8:21*; see also *Genesis 6:5*). On the face of it, this statement suggests a fatalistic world view: there is no point in punishing man because he will always be corrupt. But that is not what the rest of the covenant suggests, nor what the midrashim say. When God sees that Noah's first act upon leaving the ark is to offer a sacrifice to Him, God concludes that, although man is born a selfish creature, he can, through wisdom (which he later acquires), turn the evil inclination towards the good. And so, although man is not born with virtues, he develops them.

The generation of the Flood continued to be motivated by selfishness for the rest of their lives: "Every product of the thoughts of his heart was but evil *always*" (*Genesis 6, 5*). The Nephilim (the Giants) never outgrew this primary stage, when man is completely selfish—more like an animal than a human being. According to *The Book of Enoch*, they physically behaved like animals. They ate man, as well as beast, and drank their blood. But Noah learned his lesson in the ark. With wisdom and maturity, he turned the evil inclination towards the good. And so, God turns to Noah and blesses him and his sons: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land." The same carnal desire that drew the angels to the daughters of men, and consequently brought about the Flood, can, if directed towards good, be turned into a blessing.

To conclude his new covenant, God refers to the rainbow not as something for Noah to see, but as a sign for future generations. And he closely ties it with the clouds that He will bring. "When I bring clouds over the earth, and the bow is seen in the cloud, then I will remember My covenant" (*Genesis 9, 14–15*). According to the midrashim, the clouds are God's wrath that man will evoke if he follows the evil inclination. But then, the appearance of the rainbow will rouse man to do good, for it is a sign that good deeds can influence the fate of mankind and prevent another total destruction. The rainbow in the cloud will remind man of the two alternatives—one to follow the evil inclination, the other to learn to direct it towards the good.



Painting of Noah's ark, ascribed to Miskin, a 17th-century Muslim artist. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

At the very end of the Biblical narrative, we are reminded of the threat of destruction and, with it, the hope for continuity and progress. The rainbow suggests the possibility of a better world, but only if man becomes a caring and an unselfish being. And as we learn from the next episode about Noah's drunkenness, not every man does. Ham betrays his father when he exposes his nakedness, and Ham's family is cursed.

Conclusion

The story of Noah and the Flood does not end with the joyful celebration that we read about in the versions for children. Nobody sees a rainbow. There is no reference to sunlight, or to any other light, either. According to the midrashim, the heavenly

bodies rested during the time of the Flood. The world was completely dark, except for the faint light that came from the gem that was hanging from the roof of the ark. Even when the sun was back in the sky, there was nothing to see. The land was finally dry, but desolate. "Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and, behold, the face of the ground was dried" (*Genesis* 8:13). The Hebrew word for dried—*harvu*—connotes not only dryness, but also desolation, devastation. The first sign of the renewal of life comes later, when Noah plants a vineyard. And who is his partner in the planting? In some midrashim it is a fallen angel; in others it is Satan. What follows is that Noah gets drunk and is humiliated. He loses his piety. Even as the world is renewed, death comes with the renewal.

In their search for the reason for the Flood, and for the consequences of this cosmic devastation, the sages have found in the Biblical narrative a lesson about the nature of man, and a moral message for every generation. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav said, "The world says that tales put people to sleep. I say that with tales you can rouse people from their sleep."

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