

Jewish Storytelling Newsletter

VOLUME 15, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2000

Storytellers Tell Big In the Big Apple

Corinne Stavish & Bonnie Greenberg // Jewish Storytelling Network Co-Chairs

We're heading to New York, where the Storytelling Network will be doing workshops, performances and special shows. At the Pre-conference (August 11-13), we're offering storytelling on Shabbat, mini-workshops by "The Magnificent Seven," a panel discussion about storytelling in education (featuring Gerry Fierst, Eva Grayzel and Lisa Lipkin), and much more. Join us for the sweetness and renewal of Shabbat at CAJE 25.

The Conference begins Sunday afternoon and goes through Thursday noon (August 13-17). Look for Peninnah Schram, Cherie Karo Schwartz, Judith Black and Gerald Fierst on Opening Night as CAJE celebrates a retrospective of 25 outstanding years. On Monday and Tuesday night at the Storytelling Cabaret, we will have performances by Eva Grayzel, Bonnie Greenberg, Corinne Stavish, Peninnah Schram, Gerry Fierst, Gail Rosen, Jennifer Rudick, Cherie Karo Schwartz, Robert Rubinstein and Vered Hankin.

Because we're in the Big Apple, the Entertainment Committee is offering special matinees

weekdays late afternoon. You can hear Judith Black, Bonnie Greenberg (with Cantor Kenny Richmond), Lisa Lipkin and Peninnah Schram (with Gerard Edery) in special concerts.

And, of course, the Storytelling Network will be well represented with Lehrhaus and Module presentations during the Conference. As if all of this isn't enough, Conference attendees can go to NYC all day for special Havayot (Intensives). Select from among Ellis Island, the Jewish Museum, the Lower East Side, and much, much more.

Want to know more? Check it out on our Web Page at www.caje.org. "It's a new world, Golde," and the Storytelling Network is part of it. Click, double click and be sure to sign up to be listed in the Storytelling Directory. We'd love to hear from you if you have ideas for the Web Page.

Start packing! See you at Hofstra University in August! For more information, call the CAJE office at 212.268.4210, email caje25@caje.org or view the website www.caje.org/events/fs_c25home.html. ■

The Day the Rabbi Disappeared: Jewish Holiday Tales of Magic

Retold by Howard Schwartz. Illustrated by Monique Passicot. Viking, 2000. 80 pp. Cloth \$15.99. Copyright 2000 Howard Schwartz. Selection reprinted with permission of the author. A recording by storyteller Vered Hankin of some of the stories from this book, including this story, will shortly be available. For more information, please contact veredstory@hotmail.com or call 212.875.PAST.

A Flock of Angels A Rosh Hodesh Tale

Long ago, in the Kurdish town of Mosul, there lived a young woman named Asenath who was known for performing wonders. Her blessings were often sought by women who wished to have babies, or by sick people who wished to be cured. Her touch had healing powers, especially for children.

Asenath had learned everything from her father, Rabbi Samuel Barzani, who was well acquainted with the secrets of Heaven. He had taught these secrets to her until her wisdom and powers were as great as his own. It was whispered among the people that the spirit of her father rested upon her, and for this reason she was known as Rabbi Asenath.

After Rabbi Samuel died, he often came to his daughter in dreams. He would reveal dangers to her and tell her how to ward them off, saving many lives. One night Asenath dreamed that Rabbi Samuel told her to go to the Kurdish town of Amadiyah for Rosh Hodesh, the celebration of the new moon. He told her that the Jews of Amadiyah needed her protection.

When it became known that Rabbi Asenath was planning to travel to Amadiyah, the people of her town pleaded with her not to go, for things

Mazal Tov!

THE KIDS' CATALOG OF PASSOVER: A WORLDWIDE CELEBRATION by Barbara Rush and Cherie Karo Schwartz (Jewish Publication Society, 2000) has just won a Parents' Choice Recommended designation. The Winter-Spring 1999-2000 *Jewish Storytelling Newsletter* includes an excerpt from this book.

PENINNAH SCHRAM RECENTLY RECEIVED TWO AWARDS for her contributions to Jewish storytelling: She was honored as Native Daughter 2000 by the Rotary Club of her hometown, New London, Connecticut, on May 18, 2000, and she was one of three women honored by Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields as a Jewish Woman in the Arts at the annual Celebration of Jewish Heritage on June 27. Her accomplishments are outlined in a review essay by Mara Loeb, "Profile of Peninnah Schram: The Teacher and the Storyteller," in the July 2000 *Text and Performance Quarterly*, published by the National Communication Association. This 12-page article covers Peninnah's work in Jewish storytelling, her essays and books of folktales, and her performance on the CD, *The Minstrel and the Storyteller*.

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The Day the Rabbi Disappeared, continued from page 1

had become dangerous for the Jews living there. "All Jews have been warned to stay away from Amadiyah," they warned her. "If you go, you will surely be risking your life!" But Asenath had made up her mind. She bid farewell to the people of her town and began her journey.

When Rabbi Asenath reached the town that she had visited so often, she was given great respect as a holy woman. But the people were upset when she told them that they should celebrate Rosh Hodesh outdoors, so they could see the crescent of the new moon, as was their custom. They wanted to stay in the safety of the synagogue, for they knew they were surrounded by enemies and that their very lives were in danger. "Don't be afraid," she told them. And their faith in God and their trust in her were so great that they agreed to proceed as in the past, despite the danger.

So on the night of Rosh Hodesh, all the people came out to celebrate the new moon and the new month. At first they were cautious, yet soon they were singing and dancing in the town square with abandon. But suddenly there were shouts and they saw flames shoot up into the sky. The synagogue had been set on fire! Thank God, no one had been inside it. Yet they could not bear to see their synagogue consumed in flames. Many men had to be held back so they wouldn't run inside and be burned to death while trying to save the Torah scrolls. Everywhere people wept, falling to their

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Rosh Hodesh

Rosh Hodesh marks the beginning of a new Jewish month. The new month begins when the new moon appears. In biblical times, months were calculated by the moon, and Rosh Hodesh was a minor festival. Special offerings were made and the shofar, the ram's horn, was sounded, as written in Psalms 81:4: "Sound the shofar on the new moon . . . for the festive day." In talmudic times, the beginning of a new month was declared when two witnesses saw the crescent of a new moon and reported it to the Sanhedrin, the high court. They relayed this information by lighting signal fires on hilltops.

Jewish legend records God making Rosh Hodesh a special day for women, to reward them for refusing to help their husbands build the golden calf at Mount Sinai. It was traditional for women not to work on this day. In recent years, Jewish women have rediscovered Rosh Hodesh as a time to celebrate the rebirth and renewal of women and the moon. They choose Rosh Hodesh as a naming ceremony for baby daughters or as a time to meet for religious and educational purposes. ■

knees, for they knew the flames were fast approaching the Ark where the Torahs were kept.

At that very moment, Rabbi Asenath whispered a secret name, one that she had learned from her father. All at once the people heard a loud flapping and a great wind swirled around them, and they thought that a flock of birds must be overhead. But when they looked up, they saw a flock of angels descending to the roof of the synagogue. The angels beat the flames with their wings, until every last spark had been put out. Then they rose up into the heavens like a flock of white doves and were gone.

The people were awestruck. They cried out, "Angels! Angels!" And when the smoke cleared, they saw that another miracle had taken place: the synagogue had not burned. Nor was a single letter of any of the Torahs touched by the flames.

When the enemies of the Jews learned of the miracle of the angels and saw how the synagogue had been saved from the fire, they were so fearful that they dared not harm the hair of a single Jew.

As for the Jews of that town, they wept and prayed and thanked God for saving them and their beloved synagogue. And they were so grateful to Rabbi Asenath that they renamed the synagogue after her, and it is still standing to this day.

And all this came to pass because of Rabbi Asenath's courage and loyalty in honoring her father's wish, conveyed in a dream, that she go to that town for the celebration of the new moon. ■

—*Kurdistan: Seventeenth Century*

Rabbi Asenath Barzani

Until the modern era, very few women were given the title of "Rabbi." But sometimes a woman's wisdom and learning were so exceptional that this title was given to her. Such is the case with Rabbi Asenath Barzani, who lived in Mosul, Kurdistan from 1590-1670. Another was Hannah Rochel Werbermacher, known as the Maid of Ludomir, who lived in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth century and was also recognized as a rabbi. Rabbi Asenath was the daughter of Rabbi Samuel Barzani, who headed many yeshivas during his lifetime, and whose authority in Kurdistan was absolute. He was a master of Kabbalah, and he was said to have taught the secrets of Kabbalah to his daughter, Asenath.

After Rabbi Barzani died, many Jews made pilgrimages to his grave in Amadiyah. His daughter adored her father, whom she regarded as a king of Israel. He was her primary teacher, and after his death she took over many of his duties. Not only did Asenath serve as a rabbi, but she became the head of the Yeshivah of Mosul, and eventually became known as the chief teacher of Torah in Kurdistan. In addition, she was a poet and an expert on Jewish literature, and there are many Kurdish legends about the miracles she performed, such as the one described in "A Flock of Angels." ■

Q&A

Robert Rubinstein

Interview by Nadia Grosser Nagarajan

Robert is a storyteller and teacher whose answers enlighten, educate and touch people's hearts.

Q: How has your storytelling affected your teaching career? Do you feel that being a storyteller and a teacher are just two sides of the same coin?

A: I began teaching in 1969 as part of the new "Schools Without Failure" curriculum at Roosevelt Junior High School (now Middle School) [in Eugene, Oregon]. One of the aspects of this new program asked teachers to create new, innovative classes. I created one nine-week class in storytelling open to all students of every ability, and then originated another class called "The Troupe of Tellers," seventh-ninth grade students who left the school during the school day to perform for other students. I have taught at Roosevelt all these years—31 years, and during that time taught storytelling and folktale classes each year as well as "Myths & Legends." So, during all these years I have used storytelling in these classes as well as literature and history classes—or as a guest teller of multicultural tales in a "Death & Dying" class at Roosevelt. I believe that the two most essential teacher education courses a future teacher — or established teacher — should take to be effective are interpersonal communication, and storytelling or improvisation. With storytelling, you become a more lively and interesting teacher, and students are more motivated to listen and remember what you say.

Q: You have been working for many years with youth tellers. Tell us why you have chosen that path.

A: Storytelling offers all people, from the shy to the outspoken, from the non-reader and unsuccessful student to the gifted one, a chance to share, communicate and receive acknowledgement from others. There's such powerful magic in knowing that you can spin a tale and have others entranced or laughing with you. I still am

continually amazed at the talent, ability, creativity and insight of young people when we give them the opportunity to explore and express their interests and feelings. With a non-reader, I have someone paired to read the story to him until he knows it (we don't memorize). Jevon, who is severely hearing-impaired, performed with the Troupe on tour, then with the National Theatre of the Deaf and now acts in Hollywood. Ryan has cerebral palsy, but was a delightful teller. Others couldn't function academically, but, when encouraged, communicate through speaking. And once they began to find success in telling and enjoying stories, they were motivated to read and their behaviors and academic abilities improved.

The librarian informed me that "We don't read stories here for storytime. We tell them." ...So, I told stories — and fell in love with the wonder and enjoyment of telling and sharing.

Q: What were the main challenges you have faced over the years working with young people and while directing the nationally known troupe of tellers from Roosevelt Middle School?

A: When we performed in the Troupes, they understood that they were professionals as far as I was concerned. The Troupe was only as good as its weakest teller — and we'd work together to improve. They would prepare and critique each other. Individually, they were responsible for developing their four story-plus repertoire that was ready at all times — and then each team's two story theatre pieces. I selected the 12 troupe members each spring term based on what I had seen of their behavior, preparation

and, third, ability to tell. We could help them improve as tellers, but could not do much about the first two qualities.

Q: What kind of stories are your favorites and why?

A: My favorite stories are Jewish tales and humorous tales from peoples around the world. I think I'm more inclined to look at life — and laugh. However, I also enjoy teaching monster folklore and telling monster tales. My jump endings have, accidentally, landed on listeners' fingers when they sat too closely on the floor producing more shock than I had intended!

Q: Your students are allowed to improvise while storytelling. To what extent do you allow it and why?

A: I encourage my students to improvise and create as part of the oral telling tradition as well as their story theatre pieces. I love to see what they'll invent and how they incorporate that into entertaining performance. One such example was "Little Red Riding Hood in New York City," performed by two of the girls in the Troupe on stage at the Hult Center for the Performing Arts.

Q: Is coaching in drama necessary while teaching storytelling, and can most children learn to do it?

A: As noted above, most people, especially children, can learn to tell stories and do so without recognizing they're essentially telling stories. However, for performance, it is necessary to teach dramatic skills for characterization, dialogue, pacing, vocal projection, gestures, facial expression, eye contact, voice tone, etc.

Q: Your recordings have received very fine national reviews. Do you have any suggestions for parents and particularly teachers who are interested in pursuing storytelling?

A: My last recording, "Strange Tales from Biblical Times," was an amazing experience because my two sons, Joshua (trumpet) and Seth (cello), created and played the music to accompany my stories. Last December's very nice American Library Association *Booklist* review commented on their music. When I present workshops on storytelling to teachers or parents, I encourage them to tell stories themselves. The more I model storytelling for my students in school in the various classes I

— continued on page 4 —

We Tell Our Story

Cherie Karo Schwartz

We tell our story
in our names:
Hebrew and English, ancient and new
ancestors, family names, nicknames
names we grow into, change, discard
and names we give ourselves

We tell our story
in our ways:
in our festive clothes and pearls
in our kipot and compassion
in our menschlik behavior
our tzedakah and mitzvot

We tell our story
in our homes:
in our Jewish art and symbols
the books upon our shelves
Bubbe's recipes, Zaide's kiddush cup
our mezuzot upon the doors

We tell our story
from our Torah:
in the pain of creation, sibling rivalry
wandering in the wilderness
the creating of sanctuary

We tell our story
from our days:
feast of Sukkot, fast of Yom Kippur
journey of Passover, ganzeh Megillah
brit, bnai mitzvot; marriage, and death
endings, beginnings; cycles and years

We tell our story
from our generations:
from shtetl, ghetto, medina, and town
come photos, foods, candlesticks, coins
memories, profiles, names, sacred books
echoes within us, transcending guides

We tell our story
from our tradition:
We proclaim it from the mountain
We fiddle it from the rooftops
We inscribe it on our houses
And we tell it to our children

We tell our story
from our midrash:
We read, reveal, revel, redefine
in laughter, in tears, in living the tales
opening ourselves each minute and day
to our story's unfolding eternity

We tell our story
from our lives:
And if we listen, really listen
in the moment of living our tales
then our stories come within us
telling us now; telling the generations.

We tell our story
from our Jewish soul:
We read it, speak it, sing it,
We dance it, drum it, dream it
from our overflowing hearts
and into the soul of the world.

Q & A, continued from page 3

teach and the more they enjoy hearing the stories, then the more they will risk telling stories themselves. As a teacher, it's more difficult, and with some students impossible, to order someone to risk telling in front of a group of people when you yourself won't do it and don't understand the experience.

Q: What influenced you to become a storyteller? Was it a particular person, event or books you read?

A: Aside from hearing Spencer Shaw tell some stories once in the Levittown Public Library on Long Island, I had no connection with storytelling until I became a children's librarian under Miss Martha Engler in the South Boston Public Library. Miss Engler informed me that

"We don't read stories here for storytime. We tell them." . . . So, I told stories — and fell in love with the wonder and enjoyment of telling and sharing.

Q: You are now the director of the Multicultural Storytelling Festival that brings many different ethnic storytellers together. What do all these storytellers have in common? Do they share the magic that is ingrained in most stories? Do their techniques differ a lot and, if so, does it really matter in the final analysis?

A: This is the tenth year of the Multicultural Storytelling Festival. We've had wonderful tellers from a wide variety of ethnic groups, including blind and deaf tellers, come to the Eugene area local schools to meet with over 8,000 students, and then give community workshops and concerts. The tellers have all shared a

love of telling, of people and, especially, of sharing their heritage through story. The children, especially, have gained insight, appreciation and understanding of other peoples. The schools' responses have been terrific! Of course, with each culture, comes the storyteller's unique way of telling and performing.

In summary: e. e. cummings said, "i would rather learn from one bird how to sing than teach one hundred stars how *not* to dance." I've learned a tremendous amount from my students in storytelling — especially seeing their abilities and beauty when given the chance to "sing." I would hope that those young people who have enjoyed stories and learned the art of storytelling will share and teach their "dance" to others through the years. ■

STORYTELLING PROGRAMS AT THE 92ND STREET Y ~ 2000-2001

Storytelling Open House

Thursday, September 14, 8 PM
FREE EVENT

Explore the latest storytelling books. Meet the authors and hear their tales. Participants include Lisa Lipkin, *Bringing the Story Home: The Complete Guide to Storytelling for Parents* (W.W. Norton); Peninnah Schram, *Stories Within Stories from the Jewish Oral Tradition* (Jason Aronson) and *The Chanukah Blessing* (UAHC Press); Steve Zeitlin, *The Four Corners of the Sky: Ancient Myths and Cosmologies from Around the World* (Henry Holt).

The Oral Tradition: Jewish Stories for Adults \$50/subscription, \$12/evening

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 9 AT 8 PM
Storytelling is More Than Telling Stories
Roslyn Bresnick-Perry

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 14 AT 8 PM
**Kindling the Flame:
Stories & Songs for Chanukah**
Peninnah Schram and Gerard Ederly

THURSDAY, JANUARY 25 AT 8 PM
**The Torah is Not in Heaven:
New Visions from the Old Book**
Arthur Strimling

THURSDAY, MARCH 1 AT 8 PM
**A Queen Unmasked:
The Secrets of the Scroll of Esther**
Amichai Lau-Lavie

THURSDAY, APRIL 19 AT 8 PM
**The Day the Rabbi Disappeared:
Jewish Holiday Tales of Magic**
Howard Schwartz and Vered Hankin

Storytelling Workshops

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 29
10 AM-2 PM, \$40
**The Jewish Life Cycle
In Story and Song**
Peninnah Schram and Gerard Ederly

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 11
10 AM-2 PM, \$40
Sharing Personal Stories
Lisa Lipkin

THURSDAYS, MARCH 15, 22, 29
& APRIL 5, 7-9 PM, \$70
**Telling the Tale: An Introduction to
the Art of Storytelling**
Peninnah Schram

Call 212.996.1100 for registration and information.

The Jewish Storytelling Center Offers...

■ **FIVE THURSDAY EVENING MEETINGS FROM NOVEMBER TO APRIL**

Meet and talk storytelling • A time to network • Swap Jewish stories

■ **ACCESS TO THE BUTTENWIESER LIBRARY, 92ND STREET Y**

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Jewish tales presented by master storytellers

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- News and calendar of storytelling events
- Discussion articles and brief tales
- Reports on storytelling festivals and conferences
- Resources: books and recordings

**MEMBERSHIP IN THE
JEWISH STORYTELLING CENTER**

\$60 for a 12-month period includes meetings, admission to The Oral Tradition series, and the *Jewish Storytelling Newsletter*. (Additional \$20 per year for Library borrowing privileges.)

NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIPTIONS

\$10 for 12 months for newsletter only, for persons who are neither Jewish Storytelling Center nor CAJE members. CAJE members may request the newsletter as part of their CAJE membership by writing to CAJE, 261 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001.

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\$60 for JSC membership \$80 with Library privileges \$10 for newsletter only

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New Resources

Peninnah Schram

The Day the Rabbi Disappeared: Jewish Holidays Tales of Magic. By Howard Schwartz. Illustrated by Monique Passicot. New York: Viking, 2000. 80 pp. Cloth \$15.99. For each of twelve holidays, Howard Schwartz presents a story featuring a magical feat by a wise rabbi for the benefit of the Jewish people. The rabbis, both men and women, reveal the secret meaning of dreams and names, contend with angels and enchantments, bring about miracles. The book is produced with elegant black-and-white art which enhances the dignified presentation of sources, discussion of each holiday, and biographies of the main characters. This is another of Howard Schwartz's magnificent contributions to the world of folktales. (See story in this issue.)

Stories Within Stories from the Jewish Oral Tradition. By Peninnah Schram. Foreword by Howard Schwartz. Jason Aronson, Fall 2000. 350 pp. Cloth. The 50 stories in this book, a collection of Jewish stories-within-stories, are drawn from Talmudic and

midrashic sources, medieval sources, and especially the Israel Folktale Archives. Frame narratives have been popular both in Jewish and non-Jewish cultures with the most popular being the well-known *The Arabian Nights*. In this narrative tradition, one tale leads to another. The stories offer a great variety of stories- within-stories, ranging from humorous tall tales to Hasidic tales.

The Chanukah Blessing. By Peninnah Schram. Illustrated by Jeffrey Allon. UAHC Press, Fall 2000. Cloth. \$12.95. At Chanukah, a poor family has only enough potatoes for a small latke-kugel. But when a guest appears at the door, they share what they have, although the children are not too happy about this. The guest then tells the family why he chose that particular home to visit. And when he leaves, the family realizes that the guest had been Elijah the Prophet and their home is filled with blessing.

Journeys with Elijah: Eight Tales of the Prophet. Retold by Barbara Diamond Goldin. Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney. Gulliver/Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1999. 77 pp. Cloth \$20. Eight tales are presented featuring this favorite folklore hero, Elijah the Prophet, in his many disguises, bringing hope and performing wondrous miracles as he travels from the cornfields of Argentina,

to doorsteps of China, to Persian ruins; in other words, everywhere in the world. Although the author took some liberties in setting the stories in exotic locales, they might have been told in those countries since Elijah was a figure beloved by Jews everywhere, in all our sacred and folk literature, and throughout the ages. The paintings which illustrate the book are some of the most magnificent I have ever seen! The author also includes a bibliography for further reading about Elijah the Prophet.

Moses and the Angels. By Ilene Smith Sobel. Illustrated by Mark Podwal. Delacorte, 1999. Cloth \$16.95. The paintings have the feeling of child-like crayon drawings. A number of stories are about Moses and how the angels moved the Exodus along. These tales, drawn from the legends, folklore, stories and speculation that exist in Jewish literature, are mostly familiar, with some being less known. Did you know, for example, that Moses took a detour to Ethiopia where he served as king and armed the Ethiopian soldiers with menacing storks? After some years, Moses returned to his own people in Egypt because he did not want to worship the Ethiopian gods. There is a list of sources at the end of the book. The vivid illustrations are by the talented Mark Podwal. ■

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