



Inside Stories & the Jewish Narrative

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Is There a Jewish Story?
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Rather late in the process of putting together this issue, I asked four people who work with stories — writers, biblical scholars, and folklorists — to answer a simple but nuanced question: Is there a Jewish story? Their brief, pointed responses, interspersed throughout the following pages, provide threads that weave together this issue of *Sh'ma*. What began as an exercise in airing out our great historical narrative, the Pesach story — that is, exploring how Jews continue to build on that story as a cultural and religious cornerstone — emerged as a collection of reflections on our diasporic existence, our creative riff on Bible, our deep and powerful culture of storytelling, and our broad interpretation of narrative.

I wish all of our readers engaging and vibrant Pesach *sedarim*, long and winding evenings of story, Susan Berrin

Story Tellers: A New Story of Jewish Identity

BARRY SHRAGE

The ultimate impact of the leader depends most significantly on the particular story that he or she relates or embodies... Leaders tell stories about themselves and their groups, about where they are coming from and where they are headed, about what is to be feared, struggled against, and dreamed about... The most basic story has to do with issues of identity. And so it is the leader who succeeds in conveying a new version of a given group's story, who is likely to be effective.

—Howard Gardner, *Leading Minds*

This year, Passover arrives at a time of great hope and frightening dreams, of pessimism and renewed optimism, of darkness and vision — on the surface, assimilation and decline; beneath the surface, renaissance and renewal. For a moment, a brief moment perhaps, the American Jewish community has the power to define itself, to tell a new story.

My teacher, the late Dr. Michael Osband, taught in the name of Rav Soloveitchik that two different kinds of storytelling take place as part of Jewish holidays — *zachor* and *sipur*. While the memory of other holidays is transmitted through the *zachor* (remembering) process, Passover requires the more active process of *sipur* — active, personal, storytelling.

Through the *sipur* process, we tell a story that actually happened to us. For the Rav, the seder is literally a time warp. We are slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. We are fellow revolutionaries with Rabbi Akiva in B'nei Brak, waiting for the final battle between good and evil; we are present at countless *sedarim* with generations

of great rabbinic figures; we are reading the four questions and new unimaginable, horrible questions with Mordechai Anielewicz in the Warsaw Ghetto, and we are celebrating in Jerusalem, in Israel reborn with Ben-Gurion in 1949. We embody all these stories because we are actually present — right now — in all of them simultaneously.

Sipur, the process of active storytelling, is itself an act of leadership, transformation, and liberation. Particularly in a time when the very structure of our Jewish community life appears to be changing, when the old stories don't appear to be working anymore, when we shift from an old worldview to an uncertain future, the leader as storyteller becomes critical to the process of connecting with the past and creating a vision of a transcendent future. The leader, then, uses the turmoil of the sea and the wilderness to create a vision of a new future and a renewed community.

When we create our own seder, we become the architect of our own redemption. As we lead our seder and tell the story to our children, we

are also defining ourselves rather than letting our oppressors or our oppression define us; we are liberating ourselves, and ensuring our future.

How will this year's seder be different from all others? Who will sit at our seder? What questions will they ask and what stories will we tell? As we gather our families and friends around the table, many of us will be sitting with children raised in interfaith households and young adults who have returned from Taglit-Birthright Israel trips to Israel. Those children and grandchildren may be asking surprisingly spiritual questions. (A recent study found that the next generation of Jews is actually more spiritual than the last and that the children of intermarriage are the most spiritual of all.) And Birthright, like the seder itself, is a *sipur* experience — a personal journey during which individuals begin to experience Jewish history by traveling the land and meeting their peers. So our Birthright returnees may well ask questions about their history and what ties them to the Jewish people.

What story will we tell them at our seder in 5770, when they ask: What is this service, this story, to you?

- In a time that lacks vision and prophecy and that yearns for meaning, our stories carry an ancient faith in an ancient God

so that our children and grandchildren will have spiritual options to fill their lives with light and joy.

- In a time of greed and selfishness, our stories are part of an old — a very old — tradition of caring for strangers, the poor and oppressed, the widows and orphans, the elderly and handicapped.
- In a time of forgetfulness, our stories are part of a living chain of learning and literature, allowing us to be inheritors of an ancient and hauntingly beautiful culture.
- In a time of anomie and loneliness, we carry the secret of community building that provides our children with a sense of caring and belonging.
- In a time of rootlessness and alienation, our stories are connected to a religious civilization with a 3,500-year-old history and an infinite future and the ultimate responsibility for the betterment of humankind in the name of the God whose story is at the heart of our existence.

Our capacity to tell this new story will test our strength as leaders and storytellers, mothers and fathers, grandparents and teachers. Much, though, depends on how we elicit and respond to questions — to the stories of our children and grandchildren.



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Restoring the Sacred Story: Can Judaism's Master Story Survive the Age of Information?

AMICHAEL LAU-LAVIE

Ten minutes into the seder, an iPhone beeps. I look up from the Haggadah and there's Nicky, 15, sitting across from me, texting away. Her brother, to my right, is busy with his smartphone, and his wife of four months, new to the family and new to Judaism, whispers, a tad too loudly: "Stop tweeting." Seder stops. Everyone's yelling.

This (familiar?) snapshot describes a 2,000-year-old storytelling ritual and its contemporary woes. But it's not just about Passover or the perils of technology. This snapshot reveals a crucial challenge facing each and every nation and culture today, just as it has challenged each and every previous generation: How do we make new meaning of our inherited past? Can humanity's sacred stories survive the fast evolving modern marketplace of myths and ideas?

The seder, even though it is the most popular Jewish activity, according to the United Jewish Communities' National Jewish Population Survey of 2000, is also an example of how the inherited past of rites, symbols, and narratives no longer feels personally relevant for more and more people like Nicky.

But, unknowingly, Nicky was perfectly playing her part in the seder story, embodying the fourth child of the Haggadah, the one who keeps silent, not knowing enough to ask a basic question. The original authors of the Haggadah didn't have to deal with Twitter, but they did face the challenges of transmitting cultural values. The parable of the four children demonstrates an early pedagogy in which values are examined through the medium of storytelling. Each of the four children represents the various

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possible reactions within each one of us and among all of us as we struggle with the role of sacred stories in our lives. But the authors of this parable didn't just capture the essence of this timeless challenge; they also came up with a smart solution, still viable and vital today, even if often overlooked. "At p'tach lo," the Haggadah instructs: "It is your responsibly to open for them." It is the duty of parents, teachers, and leaders to open the doors to curiosity, and to transmit our values by making the stories become alive, accessible, and meaningful to everyone sitting at our table.

How do we, today, provide access to the sacred story? Before tackling the "how" I'd like to suggest that we examine the "why." What meaning can we make of this story today? Why should it matter at all?

"There are master stories that we tell ourselves and by which we interpret and respond to the events which impinge on our lives."¹ James Fowler, a professor of theology and human development writing about the life of faith, identified stories as a key ingredient in the development and shaping of our personalities and collective contracts. "Our master stories" he continues, "disclose the ultimate meaning of our lives."

The story of the Exodus is clearly one of the Western world's master stories, and is arguably the mega-master story of the Jewish people. Like many other grand stories, the biblical saga of how the Hebrews suffered as slaves and found their way to freedom presents their descendants with a link to the past and a message of hope for a better future. Like all great stories, the Exodus is framed in a basic grid: struggle and resolution. The stories of Cinderella, Hamlet, and even Avatar — currently the best-selling "story" — recall transformation, echoing struggle and the hope for resolution. We cherish these stories and pass them on because they mirror and mold what's stored in our minds; they remind us of how we see the world — a story of struggle and survival.

For most Jews seated around seder tables today, the Exodus story is more about historical and national survival — an act of strengthening our collective identity by retelling the struggle that forged us as a people. In answer to the question "why tell the Exodus story?" most of us will reply, as the Haggadah instructs: "Remember where we Jews came from: We suffered and survived."

But there's another way to answer this question, and perhaps this other "why" can make this story and its radical message acces-

sible and important to many more of us today. Jewish stories, according to mystical Jewish teachings, are not important just because they happened once, but because they keep happening. The stories, retold, enable us to eat the fruit, survive the flood, flee Egypt, and reactivate revelation. These master stories give voice to our most cherished notions, private and public, personal and collective — of what is sacred, what really matters, and what our role is in the world. As the People of the Book, connecting to our recycled stories reaffirms our identity. As human beings, these same stories are agents of transformation, resonating with our deeper selves. Stories are equipment for living. We read books and go to the movies because stories, more than anything else, teach us, move us, and help us grow. "Stories hide meanings as a bottle contains wine and as the body is filled with soul," states the Zohar. The personal, often private meaning that each one of us makes of these stories is the real reason for the survival of our master stories. The Exodus story is the master story of our people; it is also the personal master story for each one of us. And, like every story, like all scriptures, the sacred story is but a gateway to an endless, timeless conversation that can inform our minds, touch our souls, mark our journeys, and bring us closer to ourselves and to each other.

This year, at the seder table, I will tell the story and invite all present to consider their personal narrative of struggle, transformation, and resolution. What is your personal "Egypt," your "narrow place of difficulty" today? How are we free? And how are we not? What part of this story echoes our contemporary social struggles? I will probably only use highlights from the Haggadah, that ancient anthology that focuses on the collective story and leaves us so much room to make the story our own — new each time.

Will this version of the story get Nicky to stop texting and enter the story? Will it enrich her inner life and make her curious enough to ask a question and to ponder the significance of the Jewish legacy to her life? I hope so. The best I can do is open the door *to the story* and invite her in.

It is our duty to open the door to the deep meaning of our stories. And once we figure out the "why should this story matter" question, there's still the "how" challenge. How does a 2,000-year-old technology of sacred storytelling adapt to the new forms by which we consume values? But that's a whole other story....

¹ Fowler, James, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, New York: HarperOne, 1981, pp. 82-84.

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Passover is about storytelling (“Haggadah,” of course, means “the telling”) and order is the meaning of the word “seder.” The tension between the freedom to create one’s own Passover script and the set form of the seder — the 15 steps, from *kadesh* through *nirtzah* — makes Pesach something like a jazz performance.

1. The Jews have no single Haggadah, and thank God for that. The lack of a centralized text, and Passover’s dining-room setting, means that Pesach is, in many respects, a homemade *chag*.
2. While some *sedarim* emanate directly from, say, the rabbis of Maxwell House, some people dare to create a story specifically for the people around their table.
3. For me, a great seder is highly interactive; it’s a chance for our own family or Jewish community to perform together the story of Jewish liberation.
4. The big question: How to get a table full of Jews to engage proficiently with the Haggadah? One would need all the children — the wise, wicked, simple, and the question-free children — along with their parents, to listen carefully and respond with ample intelligence and feeling. A place at the table can be earned with one’s ears, brain, mouth, and vocal chords. Technology can help.
5. Someday soon, *sedarim* will be conducted from iPhones. No more Manischewitz Haggadot.
6. Here’s a Passover tweet of the future: “Manischewitz = the wine of affliction.”
7. Yes, iPhones. For those of you for whom the term “People of the Book” isn’t just a bitter 21st-century joke — for whom Jewish culture remains the *ne plus ultra* of bookishness — hear me out. Many serious readers own and use iPhones. Their lives are seriously bound up with email and texting, and they understand that using social media (that is, the sort of communally written content one gets on YouTube, FaceBook, and Twitter) is not merely a rebarbative habit of the computer-drugged young. These people will one day put their smartphones to a real Jewish use.

8. Imagine a table of family and friends, heads bent over illuminated little screens. Emails and tweets and digital pictures of Hillel sandwiches shooting across the table and to the outside world, and then back again around the table. Imagine how empowering this will be to the young and shy — wicked and wise children writing wicked and wise things with a few expert taps. Imagine having the ability to fact check any and all points raised at the seder table.
9. The iPhone Passover can be chaotic, with any number of *pishers* virtually heckling the seder. With a premium on responding quickly in the world of social media, one writes back with comments. You like. You share. If you fear and hate interruption, this innovation isn’t for you.
10. But the truth is, even at a good, nondigital seder, there is a lot of disruption. It might be useful to have those blurted-out questions and comments put into writing. It might force the blurters to be more thoughtful, to formulate better blurts.
11. If your seder is one where all the guests are intent on strictly following the order — the words and paragraphs and pages — of the Haggadah, or following the halakhot on iPhones, this seder is not for you.
12. If the print-based Haggadah is a game of follow-the-leader, the iPhone seder is choose-your-own adventure volume.
13. A caveat: If your guests aren’t curious or courteous or interested in the Pesach story in the first place, the iPhone will probably make things worse, because the iPhone can easily lead the uninterested to check their email, stocks, and sports scores.
14. Is it feasible? There are millions of iPhone users right now, and you can download a Haggadah app from a company called Hada Porat for \$2.99 and the *Union Haggadah* goes for \$.99. Neither of these apps is ideal, but they are a start. My wife looked at both and said, “They’re cheat sheets.” Perhaps they are, but I prefer to think of them as lead sheets. Love that Passover jazz.
15. The truth is, the iPhone is a tool — as is a Haggadah. It’s only as useful, or as dangerous, as the people touching it.

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Serving a Shared Culture

JOSH LAMBERT

Do the stories that children read, watch, and listen to carry moral consequences for their lives? Robert Coles insists they do. A child psychiatrist, Harvard professor, and best-selling author, Coles has dedicated a long and distinguished career to eliciting, recording, and publishing the reflections of children in the United States and around the world. He often returns to the notion that narrative serves a hortatory function in the lives of youth. He is a scholar of great literary erudition who has published biographies of writers Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, in addition to dozens of psychological studies of childhood. In fact, Coles trained as a doctor because of a suggestion by the poet William Carlos Williams.

Coles makes his point about the power of narrative in the same way he communicates most of his insights, by referring to what young people have told him. In *The Moral Intelligence of Children* (1997), he describes a thirteen-year-old boy “prompted by a film to become a moral witness of sorts, quite stirred to contemplate this life’s rights and wrongs.” Based on observations and interviews of thousands of children, Coles proclaims further that “Cinderella, Robin Hood, David and Goliath, Jack (of the beanstalk), Goldilocks, the Pied Piper of Hamelin, Little Red Riding Hood, and those dogs and bunny rabbits, cats and chickens and frogs whom, anthropomorphically, various storytellers have handed over to young listeners and readers,” all encourage “them to wonder ... about ethical issues.” Inspired by such tales, Coles reports, children discover their moral values.

Yet which moral values children should discover in these stories Coles does not specify. On the contrary, his emphasis on the moral function of narrative derives from a broadly ecumenical perspective, in which no particular system of values takes precedence over any other. The dutiful son of a pious American Episcopalian mother and a half-Catholic, half-Jewish, atheistic British father, Coles evinces heartfelt respect for the diversity of traditions and belief systems without privileging any one. “Children very much need a sense of purpose and direction in life, a set of values grounded in moral introspection — a spiritual life,” he remarks, but he insists that such values can be passed on by families and communities that es-

chew institutional religion and do not believe in God just as well as they can be by members of traditional religious groups. Like his parents, whom he describes in *The Call of Stories* (1989) and elsewhere as sharing a love of literature while disagreeing about religious observance, he seizes on narrative as a form of culture that transcends ideological differences.

Stories that too directly impose their morality thus do not appeal to Coles. When he considers Judaism and its foundational texts, he appreciates the Torah not as a source of commandments and prohibitions — he disdains religious “rule setters,” describing them as “all too insistent, some would say even a bit tyrannical” — but rather as an anthology of narratives: “stories of meaning, stories of loss, stories that are redemptive in nature.” It is precisely the fact that these stories can so readily be stripped of their original contexts and implications and newly interpreted by a range of readers that allows Coles to embrace them as a means of moral education for children. Biblical tales that have meant many different things to people of many different faiths over the centuries, like that of David and Goliath or the binding of Isaac, serve as touchstones for him, as do the widely appreciated prophets, whom he characterizes as “the great figures in Judaism.”

Coles’s work exemplifies the usefulness of narratives that can be equally meaningful for Christians, Jews, and nonbelievers. Echoing the vision of founders of the Jewish Publication Society, who in the 1880s hoped that literary culture could “form a meeting point of intellectual kinship to those who, on religious and doctrinal grounds, are most wildly and bitterly dissevered,” he sees stories serving a shared culture. Coles implies that a story’s ability to transcend cultural boundaries means that the story must be flexible enough to mean whatever a reader wants it to mean. Children read and interpret stories using the hermeneutic techniques they learn from their parents and religious authorities; narratives, then, constitute a flexible technology of moral education, not the vessels of specific values or messages. According to Coles, the particular stories we tell to children don’t matter much at all for their moral development. What matters is that we tell them stories of some kind, and then teach them how to interpret them.

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Authoring, Authority, and Authenticity: The Storying of Jewish Education

TALI ZELKOWICZ

Since the major Jewish immigration wave to America in the 1880s, Jewish educators and communal leaders have argued over the proper ways to socialize the next Jewish generations into American society. The integration story is fraught with the tension of multiple and competing values: shifts from outsider

communal anxieties about qualitative and quantitative survival:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall

There was a putatively whole, “authentic” place where Jews once lived and belonged — namely, Europe (the master narrative is thoroughly Ashkenazic).

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall

Leaving Europe for America and shifting homebase to new shores (and not Israel), may even represent the “sin” of Jewish modernity.¹

But all the king’s horses and all the king’s men could not put Humpty together again.

American culture and ideology have driven an unnatural and unholy wedge down the middle of a once-integrated Jewish life, leaving Jews and “Jewishness” bifurcated between ethnic and religious dimensions, hyphenated, truncated, and episodic.² In short, American Jewish identities are broken in pieces. And now, all the Jewish educators and all the Jewish professionals cannot seem to put Jewish life back together again in America.

How do we make explicit and transparent some of the stories Jews tell about themselves, about the authentic and authoritative, and ultimately generative, versions of Jewish identity formation?

to insider and back again and from material scarcity to abundance, the ongoing dialectics between universalism and particularism and between faith and peoplehood, content and relevance, survival and transformation. These have been the main characters in an ongoing story whose tensions can be managed, periodically even embraced, but not resolved.

This is the case I make to my Jewish education graduate students each fall, in a course called the Sociology of Jewish Education. I explain to an initially unnerved classroom that there are no guarantees for Jewish continuity, only experiments. Together, we explore how, by relinquishing belief that we can control the future, we become bold and powerful in the present, especially if we use knowledge of the past. For example, we investigate the evolution of the American bar/bat mitzvah — how it became tied to those infamous “minimum religious school requirements” over which parents and administrators engage in power struggles daily, who determines what a “real” bar/bat mitzvah entails, and how such copyrights become established. And through stories and narrative we uncover the fluid nature of the field — how it changes and how all the stakeholders in the field of Jewish education — educators, students, parents, institutional leaders, and philanthropists — are responsible to author or reinterpret our story.

Most of us have inherited an overarching and often unconscious master narrative, which I refer to as the “Humpty Dumpty Narrative.” With uncanny precision, Humpty’s tragic tale echoes contemporary American Jewish

Was there ever a high, holy place — a “wall” from which we fell? And are American Jews expecting just the right educational antidotes and formulae that will (ideally, once and for all) heal and fix the wounds from our “fall”?

Though besieged with news about the woes of contemporary Jewish life, today’s students are rejecting Humpty’s story of loss. They are experimenting with a new way of interrogating the narrative of change and loss and, under the surface, the politics of authenticity surrounding Jewish identity formation — a key to Jewish education. In class, we’re learning to ask: How can we as Jewish educators navigate multiple and competing definitions of authenticity? How do we relate and respond to the boundary pushing?” In other words, how do we make explicit and transparent some of the stories Jews tell about themselves to each other about the authentic and authoritative, and ultimately generative, versions of Jewish identity formation?

Here’s one way we’re experimenting: Students identify one artifact of contested authenticity — something that pushes Jewish boundaries in a controversial, threatening, or

¹ In 1900, Jacob David Wilowsky, rabbi of Slutsks, Russia, told an audience in New York that any Jew who came to the United States was a sinner. In his view, Judaism had no chance to survival on American soil. “It was not only home that the Jews left behind in Europe,” he said. “It was their Torah [biblical text and learning], their Talmud [rabbinic texts and learning], their yeshivot [Jewish academies of learning] — in a word, their Yiddishkeit, their entire Jewish way of life.”

² See Jonathan Woocher’s full argument about all eight types of brokenness is his (1995) “Toward a ‘Unified Field Theory’ of Jewish Continuity” in *A Congregation of Learners: Transforming the Synagogue into a Learning Community*; Isa Aron, Sara Lee, and Seymour Rossel, eds. (UAHC Press, New York)

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problematic way — and then analyze and examine their own personal and professional strategies about how it might be addressed.

I suggest to the student that examples of such artifacts³ could include: photos of Halloween books featured in a religious school or Jewish day school, a “Miriam’s breast pump” as a Jewish ritual object, the canine ritual of “bark mitzvah,” an article in *New Voices* magazine that extols the virtues of intermarried clergy, the text of a blessing offered to all the non-Jewish spouses in a congregation during High Holiday services by the senior rabbi, or a YouTube excerpt of Rabbi Funnye Capers leading his African-American congregation in Shabbat services in Chicago. Along with a tangible version of the chosen artifact, the students should bring to class responses to these questions:

- What are the advertent and/or inadvertent purposes (religious, physical, sociological) of the artifact?
- What boundaries does it push? How, for whom, and why?
- What questions, feelings, and dilemmas does this artifact raise personally for the educator?
- How do the concepts of scholars Stuart Charmé⁴ and Shaul Kelner⁵ influence your understanding of the artifact? Where do you draw the boundaries, and how might you communicate this stance to a group of congregants, learners, campers, or colleagues?

After examining the artifacts, we invite a Jewish historian and a feminist theologian to offer critical responses to the students’ treatments of the artifacts. The discussion — among students,

respondents, and other faculty guests — is charged and stimulating. One of our respondents probed the difference between “inauthentic” and “kitsch,” and all present became the main characters in an ongoing dramatic story. Indeed, reflecting on the session the next day, one student reported feeling “both frustrated and appreciative of the lack of definitive answers.” Rather than resolve, each generation’s leaders must accept their authorial power and write new culture responsibly — that is connected to our rich and varied past.

Another student imagines bringing this method of inquiry to the classroom, where seventh-graders “would identify things that are marginal or on the boundaries, and [I’d] invite my own colleagues to be the respondents.” While it can be deeply unsettling to learn that boundaries are not fixed, it should be equally empowering to realize that they can be navigated and negotiated. Herein lies part of the authority of today’s liberal Jewish educator: to determine what it really means to push the limits. With the example of Jew-Bu’s, the authenticity question becomes, “Is there some kind of acceptable syncretism, the blending of two religions, two systems of thinking?”

Liberal Jews want their boundaries to be porous, but not too porous. An orienting metaphor of porosity emerged that day, which, not surprisingly, also applies well to the social-scientific study of Jewish identity formation as a whole: the metaphor of a living cell, with a semipermeable membrane. A cell has a way to let things in from the outside and to let things out from the inside, without being inundated or losing its integrity. Words, metaphors, and narratives all shape our understanding of the past and the present, and our vision for the future. Write on. 

Discussion Guide

Bringing together a myriad of voices and experiences provides Sh'ma readers with an opportunity in a few very full pages to explore a topic of Jewish interest from a variety of perspectives. To facilitate a fuller discussion of these ideas, we offer the following questions:

1. For you, what is the greatest Jewish story?
2. What role has the Exodus story played in our development as a people?
3. Why does telling a story help the process of healing?
4. How might you tell the Pesach story differently this year?

³ One can find the list of the artifacts that students selected and analyzed at www.shma.com.

⁴ Charmé, Stuart. “Varieties of Authenticity in Contemporary Jewish Identity.” *Jewish Social Studies*. Pp. 133-155.

⁵ Kelner, Shaul. “Birthright and Creating of Ritual.” pp. 1-3. And, Kelner, Shaul. (2001) “Authentic Sights and Authentic Narratives on Taglit.” Paper presented at the 33rd annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies in Washington, D.C. on December 16, 2001.

The Ethnopoetics of Jewish Study

STEPHEN HAZAN ARNOFF

My training as a teacher of Jewish text has been earned as a student in two kinds of institutions: the university and the *beit midrash*.

As an undergraduate at Brandeis University and a doctoral student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I learned Jewish text through the lens of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. The “Science of Judaism” required that when I began to teach, I did so conscious of the historical context of the material. I learned to engage

Great texts and stories and also great teaching transcend labels of “secular” and “religious” and create a space where anyone should be able to enter, explore, and thrive.

a text through the lens of its author(s), the society in which it emerged, and the systems and mechanisms that provided its basic infrastructure. In between my undergraduate and graduate study, I participated in two *batei midrash*. The first, the Pardes Institute of Jewish Study, is a co-ed yeshiva-type program where halakhic seriousness and commitment animate discussion and form practical communal boundaries. While Pardes learners are critical thinkers, the close reading of classical texts in the original is driven by a fusion of religious and spiritual desire and love and curiosity for the text; neither were primary in my academic experiences.

After Pardes, I spent several years as a member of the Jerusalem Beit Midrash in Elul, where I discovered more about teaching than anywhere else. A pluralistic *beit midrash* grounded in the belief that secular and religious people learn best when learning together, Elul offered me a template in which both academic and *beit midrash* approaches work in tandem. It also gave me the formative experience of creating pedagogical seamlessness in a learning community of multiple backgrounds. Along these lines, “Oral Torah” ties together my pedagogical approach with my experiences of the university and the *beit midrash*.

In facilitating groups of learners new to Jewish study, we educators often gain a certain amount of pedagogical traction by introducing the malleable cultural oddity of “Oral Torah” very early in our teaching engagement. The pattern goes something like this: Even if the Bible is written in a completely foreign

language and is completely out of contemporary context for novices, we explain the tradition — that Jewish learners bring their own lenses of experience, belief, language, and aesthetic to crafting a personal vision of tradition. In practice, “Oral Torah” in traditional circles may be more ossified than some of us would prefer. However, when traditional halakhic conversation or practice are neither the means nor the end of Jewish study, “Oral Torah” offers a compelling and powerful set of tools for those new to learning text. Particularly for those who might define themselves as secular, a certain contemporary spin on the concept of “Oral Torah” frees Jewish content from the black and white lines of the pages of ancient texts and places it into much more familiar mouths and imaginations of the contemporary world.

Scholar Martin Jaffee’s groundbreaking 2001 work on rabbinic text and culture (*Torah in the Mouth: Writing and Oral Tradition in Palestinian Judaism, 200 BCE-400 CE*) demonstrates just how important “orality” is to understanding traditional Jewish text, particularly *midrash*. One of the keys to Jaffee’s approach is a concept he borrows from the scholar of oral traditions John Miles Foley. Foley teaches that we must understand all “traditional” texts — like the classical rabbinic canon — in their “immanent context,” the natural milieu where the composing culture of a text or tradition exists. This includes both oral and written influences. In *The Singer of Tales in Performance*, Foley states that “to ignore the immanent context is to force situated words out of their natural significant setting — obviously a crippling and artistically violent reorientation.” In other words, a reader, translator, or interpreter of materials derived in an environment in which orality has a strong practical influence must recognize a text’s natural environment of performance in any contemplation of it.

There is also another crucial element of orality Jaffee introduces to the field of classical Jewish text and teaching: ethnopoetics, a set of tools available for notating content from oral milieus in a manner clearly documenting and/or hypothesizing the orality imbedded in surviving literary artifacts. In *Verbal Art As Performance*, Richard Bauman describes aspects of performative material ethnopoetics. They include, but are

Stephen Hazan Arnoff is executive director of the 14th Street Y in New York City, where he founded and runs LABA: The National Laboratory for New Jewish Culture.

not limited to: insinuation, joking, imitation, translation, quotation, disclaimer, and a variety of pauses and nonverbal gestures — a full repertoire of nonverbal communication surrounding any textual content in its natural context of both composition and use.

At Elul, I found a place where not only *Wissenschaft* and the loving seriousness of a *beit midrash* could coexist, but also the harder to define “ethnopoetic” elements of study. These are aspects of compelling learning that care as much about style and presentation as mechanics, and they have become for me key elements in how I convey Jewish contents, often to very diverse groups of people — artists and culture makers, young “unaffiliated” families, secular Israelis, and others.

Here is a nonscientific list of the “ethnopoetical” elements at the heart of my teaching: Present the text in the original alongside a translation prepared by the teacher; include native Hebrew speakers in the room; maintain a good sense of humor; complement text with film, art, music, and other media; start with the Bible first, if possible; provide ample time, including unprogrammed time with food and coffee; sit in a circle; schedule opening and closing circles for the group to answer questions or comment on the theme and experience of the study session; avoid any agenda of religious praxis at all.

Both the academic and *beit midrash* approaches — and the long and diverse list of profound teachers who have taught and learned with me along the way — truly provide threads for weaving a colorful learning and teaching

basket in which I can carry my work. After all, the word “text” is derived from the Latin verb for “weaving” or “basket.” But more than anything, I rely on the often intangible “ethnopoetic” elements that bring these texts to life in study, an art I learned best at Elul, where secular and religious identities come together freely. When it comes to learning and teaching, “secular” and “religious” don’t mean much to me anymore. Great texts and stories and also great teaching transcend these labels and create a space — even if temporary — where anyone should be able to enter, explore, and thrive.

 I can only answer this prescriptively, that is, what I want a Jewish story to be. And to me, the answer is: a story that won’t leave us alone; a story that troubles, that haunts, that refuses to be pinned down or subdued by interpretation. So, at the risk of stating the obvious, that little collection of ours known as the Bible certainly qualifies, with the *Akedah* and the Book of Job as particular high points. The story for Pesach is more Jewish when Uncle Murray demands a lengthy discussion about the plagues, less Jewish when Grandma Clara rushes to *Dayenu*. As for the modern period, Leon Uris’s *Exodus* isn’t particularly Jewish, but Franz Kafka’s *Before the Law* is unbearably Jewish.

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Sh'ma Partners: Hebrew College Rabbinical School; Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion; Jewish Theological Seminary of America; Reconstructionist Rabbinical College; The Robert A. and Sandra S. Borns Jewish Studies Program, Indiana University; Frankel Center for Jewish Studies, University of Michigan; Taube Center for Jewish Studies, Stanford University; Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation; Carol Brennglass Spinner; Bruce Whizin; Marilyn Ziering

Donations to *Sh'ma* are tax deductible.

Sh'ma is available in **microfilm** from University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Mich., and in **audio format** from the Jewish Braille Institute.

Subscriptions: \$49/2 years in U.S.; \$29/1

year; \$59/2 years international; \$39/1 year international; \$21.97 for one year senior/student. Bulk subscriptions are available at reduced prices. Please notify the subscription office in writing if you prefer that your name not be given out on rented lists.

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We welcome your **feedback**. Send to Josh Rolnick, Publisher, at Jrolnick@shma.com.

Sh'ma is **published** by the Sh'ma Institute, an independent nonprofit established by Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation, with the support of FJC: A Foundation of Philanthropic Funds.

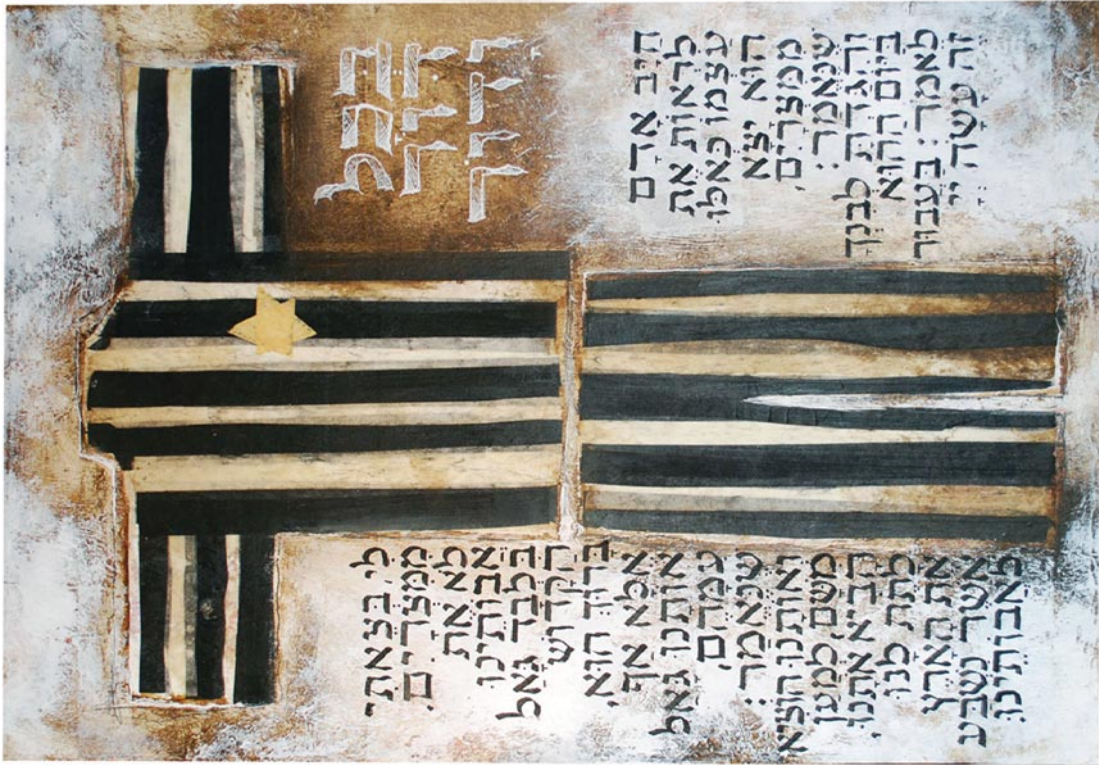
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ISSN: 0049-0385 MARCH 2010. WITH ALL SPONSORSHIPS, *SH'MA* RESERVES COMPLETE EDITORIAL CONTROL OF CONTENT.

"Finding Home" is a series of paintings that raises questions about what and where is "home," while evoking issues of identity, immigration, motherhood, and the role of art in social change. I am a Bene Israel Jew who attended Catholic and Zoroastrian schools while growing up in India — which has informed my own art.
—Siona Benjamin

Siona Benjamin
Finding Home #50
"Seder Mandala"
gouache on paper
22" x 22"





David Wander
In Every Generation
acrylic on board
18" x 24"



Peter Pizele
Deliverance
cut and torn paper
14" x 19"

Dark wings over blood-touched hovels. A red moon shadowing the silver. At midnight, the Lord smote all the firstborn. (Exodus 12:29)

Bible Raps: All Tatted Up

MATT BAR

He claims have merit; rap greases a teenager's pores with slimy booty and bling-bling and it is an outlet for guys' suppressed machismo — a shooting range for their testosterone. But curiosity, intellect, and abstraction are also part of the rap experience. While teaching Hebrew school, I use Bible raps — which create modern midrash that serve as edifying bridges to the text — in my lesson plans. What started as something in my classroom has turned into “the Bible Raps Teacher's Toolkit,” which is used by students and educators in more than 100 classrooms. In fact, there are eight year-round “Bible Raps Classes.”

Clever kids with attention deficit disorder have forever hastily crammed acronyms and other semantic time capsules with information to be unearthed minutes later and emptied into the bottom of an exam's first page. Rap can serve this purpose: a crude container for the essential information and an agreed upon acronym between teacher and student to unceremoniously empty and discard come test time. But what else can be attached to the skeleton of an educational tool? What if this skeleton comes out of the closet, tatted up, wearing sagging jeans and a confoundingly tied blue bandana beneath a baseball cap with lowered brim?

Let us unpack hip hop's baggage. Rap, in a classroom setting, uses the charm of nursery rhymes. The bridge that nursery rhymes laid out between generations is expanded in rap. More words flow without causing semantic traffic jams. Nursery rhyme roads become hip hop highways. Rap bends, embellishes, and exaggerates stories. And that fits with Torah stories, in which concubines, giants who talk smack, murders, sibling rivalry, lightning, and locusts are commonplace.

We create Bible raps as a way for students to engage the text. A rap verse demands attention. Every rap a rapper raps is his or her declaration of what rap is and who the rapper is within the culture of hip hop. Therefore, in rap, the lyrics count; they're asserted, forcefully as one's own. This creates a more vital relationship with the text. When students rap their own Bible rap, they have to mean it. (see dozens of their videos at biblerapsnation.com)

Imagine you've just written a rap explaining to Jacob/Israel, how you struggle (“Yisrael”) with your Judaism. You put the ear-muff

headphones on and instantaneously all noise is a beat. Your body thinks before your brain, and your head begins bobbing to what has now become a “funky-ass” beat. You are the only one in the room hearing the beat; outside the earphones, people watch as you begin to harangue the silence. Success is measured by how convincingly you assert your identity in the words that you rap. Keep it real. It's not easy, and the bumps of the beat feel just as rocky as the bumps of self-consciousness. Each word you use to focus on *Yisrael* flexes the stomach muscles. It's an exercise of will, of agency, of self-assertion, of being shot like an arrow toward a vision of your Judaism.

In this process we take an adolescent's attitude and, rather than condemn it in order to keep class in order, we grow it into a song, a story. This allows unchained, roaming, bounding footmarks to be stamped indelibly into the beat, to run free in the classroom, and then be tracked and heard forever. Each time students return to the rap outside of the class, whether it be their own Bible rap or one of ours, all the lessons that are associated with that song return, as if they were whistling while studying their Hebrew school notes.



Matt Bar, the Bible rapper, has been featured on MTV's “The Real World” and NBC's “Hip Hop Nation: Notes from the Underground.” He has opened for the Grammy-winning group Outkast as well as for Hasidic Jewish reggae musician Matisyahu. The Bible Raps Project is an outgrowth of the success and excitement he discovered when he introduced Bible raps into his classroom.

Matt was a fellow at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies (2009) and the Presentense Institute in Jerusalem (2007).

A Bible Rap is found on shma.com as well as on Bibleraps.com and biblerapsnation.com (kids only).



It is commonplace to assert that there is no single “Jewish story”; there is a narrative, sometimes uniform, more often confusing and indeed incoherent, that defines the Jewish experience and informs the Jewish persona. The core text of the Haggadah, “*Arami oved avi...*” — “My father was a wandering Aramaean” — is such a narrative. The text is a puzzler. It's not a central text about the Exodus; it has nothing to do with the holiday of Pesach. More likely, it's about Shavuot. It's not in the book of Exodus, but in Deuteronomy. It's about a guy who hasn't been in Egypt in 500 years who comes into the Temple with his first fruits and declares, “My father was a wandering Aramaean... *I was there*. This first-person declaration of Jewish identity and Jewish peoplehood, spanning centuries and indeed millennia, is the Jewish story.

Jerome Chanes is editor of the forthcoming *The Future of American Judaism*, a volume in the Future of American Religion series.

Stories to the Rescue

GAIL REIMER & JAYNE GUBERMAN



When Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast on the morning of August 29, 2005, it brought in its wake physical destruction on an unimaginable scale and a massive dislocation of residents of all races and socioeconomic levels. Ten thousand members of the New Orleans Jewish community joined an exodus unprecedented in American history. Overnight, the population of the Jewish community in nearby Baton Rouge literally doubled, as more than 1,000 Jewish New Orleanians took refuge there. Other Jewish communities across the south and throughout the nation also responded swiftly and generously, providing funds, shelter, and direct relief for those displaced by the storm, and mobilizing resources for rebuilding.

The experiences of the Jewish community, however, quickly became invisible. As national media attention focused almost exclusively on the devastated Lower Ninth Ward and the desperate stories of the most impoverished residents of New Orleans, scant attention was paid to the trauma of “privileged” individuals — including most of the New Orleans Jewish community — who had access to financial and communal resources. With public outrage mounting at the woefully inadequate local, national, and federal response to the catastrophe, the story of the efficient and successful Jewish communal response to the crisis seemed likely to be lost.

Documenting the Jewish stories of individuals and the community became an invaluable, if low-profile, piece of the Jewish relief and recovery efforts post-Katrina. Between August 2006 and December 2007, the Jewish Women’s Archive, in partnership with the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, recorded in-depth interviews with 85 Jewish narrators whose lives had been upended by the storm: young people and elders, women and men, lay leaders and clergy, synagogue stalwarts and secular Jews with few ties to organized Jewish life, third-generation Louisianans and relative newcomers, those who gave help and those who needed it.

After the immediate crisis passed and “Katrina fatigue” set in, Jews were among the many New Orleanians who worried about

being forgotten. “Katrina’s Jewish Voices” an online project, thus came as a relief to those who had survived the storm, providing a chance to bear witness to what they had endured and to the grief and losses they were still experiencing. For many, narrating their personal stories to sympathetic listeners and knowing that their experiences would become part of a larger communal narrative were profoundly healing. Along with hammers and nails, stories became an essential component of the recovery; telling their stories helped people to construct meaning from their experiences.

For others, the Holocaust was a crucial reminder of Jewish resilience, a reason to have hope and to rebuild.

Embedded in the narrators’ stories were echoes of older Jewish stories. Narrators consistently referenced the defining events and themes of Jewish history and imagination as touchstones for their own ordeal. Not surprisingly, the story referenced most frequently was that of the Holocaust. For some, it provided a meaningful framework for understanding the fragility of even the most prosperous and seemingly secure lives.

“It’s a really equal opportunity shocker for everybody,” reflected Judge Miriam Walzer, who as a young child saw the Nazi rise to power in Germany, *“The phones don’t work, the radios don’t work, you don’t have money, you don’t have identification, you don’t have anything to wear, you don’t have a house, your doctors are gone, your friends are gone, the city is in chaos. And you’ve gone through it once before, because when the war was over, my hometown looked like the city now does. And people would leave little notes: ‘We have gone here.’ Then you would go there. And that would be destroyed. You looked for people all over. I still remember that. Bridges destroyed. Things just sticking out, things smoldering. When I was a child.”**

For others, the Holocaust was a crucial reminder of Jewish resilience, a reason to have hope and to rebuild. When Deena Gerber, director of the Jewish Family Service of Greater New Orleans, told her story, she recalled that when *“feeling really sorry for myself, I said, ‘People who are not so genetically different from me went through the Holocaust, and they sur-*

* All quotations are from the “Katrina’s Jewish Voices” transcripts and oral historian’s field notes. For more information, go to jwa.org.

Gail T. Reimer is executive director of the Jewish Women’s Archive.

Jayne K. Guberman, director of oral history at the Jewish Women’s Archive from 1998–2009, was project director of *Katrina’s Jewish Voices*, and is currently an independent oral historian.

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Since 2003, Josh Berer has moved to a different city every year. He will begin graduate work in Central Asian folklore at Indiana University starting this fall. Visit him on the Web at <http://joshberer.wordpress.com>.

vived. They didn't get insurance, the government wasn't on their side, and they couldn't watch it on television.' In the comfort that I watched this whole thing unfold — I mean, I had an apartment, with air conditioning, and, you know — I was 'roughing it.' I didn't have a microwave. ...people have been through much worse, so there is really no reason that I'm not going to get through this."

Rosalind Hinton, the primary oral historian for "Katrina's Jewish Voices," compared the people she interviewed to persons "coming back from the brink of death" who had had to rearrange their priorities and rethink their assumptions about the world. Most interviewees, even those not particularly connected to the Jewish community, felt transformed by the swiftness and strength of the response of Jewish communities and organizations all over the country.

New Orleans Jews had to learn, as Rabbi Robert Loewy understood, that the full meaning of *zedakah* (translated both as "righteous-

ness" and "charity") meant not just a willingness to give charity, but the ability, when needed, to accept it. Speaking of applying for FEMA grants, using food stamps, and accepting the \$700 relief money offered by the Jewish federation, he said: "I made it clear that not only should they be doing it, but that I was doing it. I know that as a rabbi I'm supposed to be a role model, and I needed to be a role model for this as well."

The giving went in both directions. As Hinton reminded us time and again, many who came to New Orleans to "help" — as volunteers clearing debris or historians gathering stories — found that they were receiving as much as they were giving. At their most open and vulnerable, the narrators allowed those gathering and listening to their stories to act as witnesses to "both the breakdown and rebuilding of a Jewish community and an American community... giving us what very few archives in the world have, the record of people and a city at the moment of profound transformation." 

Fieldwork in Yemen

JOSH BERER

I first came to Yemen in 2007. I had just graduated with Arabic as my undergraduate major, focusing on its classical grammar, and on Islamic law and practice. I admit, for a Jewish boy from Los Angeles, it seemed like an odd major. I moved to Sana'a in Yemen the following summer. I went to do further readings in Islamic law and in aspects of Arabic grammar, and I stayed six months while studying at a private Arabic language institute that was geared toward the teaching of foreigners. I fell in love with Yemen that year.

I also fell in love with Yemenite Jewry and the history of this incredible community. There are roughly 250 Jews left in Yemen; around 50 of them live in the capital and the rest live in a village called Raida, 50 kilometers north of Sana'a. Due to an ongoing rebel insurgency in the north of the country, Raida and its surroundings are currently closed to foreign visitors. These Jews are among the last speakers of Judeo-Arabic, a dialect of Arabic once spoken by Jewish communities across the Arabic-speaking world, and one that has largely disappeared in the wake of Israel's creation and the subsequent Jewish exodus from Arab lands.

Thus, recording their words is of particular importance to the study of Jewish languages, many of which are on the verge of extinction. The tiny community of Jews left in Yemen is moribund, and will likely disappear within five years. Recording folklore, storytelling, and the life of the Jewish community therefore became a time-critical task.

In September of 2009, I returned to Yemen to record the folk tales of the last remaining Yemenite Jews. It seemed like a relatively easy project, so I gave it three months. As in most traditional or indigenous societies, Yemeni culture gives storytelling a unique and critical role. It is traditionally the role of the grandparents to tell stories, and in a place with no television, movies, Internet, or other distractions of modern life, the story becomes the entertainment. It binds the generations together and provides a cultural chain of transmission for the younger generations. The folklore of a people can tell volumes about their values and customs, their traditions and history.

I spent weeks with the community before I even mentioned collecting folklore. I wanted them to see me as a Jew first, an ethnographer

RACHAEL STRECHER



From left: Yusuf Musa Marhabi, father of the rabbi; Yahya Yusuf Marhabi, the rabbi; Shuma Marhabi, the rabbi's daughter; Josh Berer; Musa Yahya Marhabi, the rabbi's son; Nabila Marhabi, the rabbi's daughter.

second. When the day arrived and I came into their homes loaded with cameras, tripods, and microphones, the children gathered around, watching me set up until their grandmother came in and chased them out. The storytellers sat on a bed, chewing *qat*, a plant whose leaves produce a mild stimulant when chewed for hours. I never saw its appeal, but its use among Yemenis, Jews included, is ubiquitous. During our recording sessions, people would filter in and out, curious to see what was going on, and the women would bring us endless pitchers of tea, regardless of how many times the storytellers asked them to stay out.

The format of the stories takes several traditional forms, all readily recognizable in our own, Western story traditions. For example, the antics of the fool teach a deep and profound message, or a poor and dejected village boy learns he is of noble birth and thus brings populist understanding to the throne. Many of the stories told to me by Yemeni Jews were stories also told in the Muslim community and were, therefore, not exclusively Jewish.

From a practical perspective, the process of collecting folklore in Yemen was tricky, but not impossible. At present, the Jews living in the capital are wards of the state, having been moved from their homes in the north of the country following threats from Shi'ite rebels. The government, therefore, requires official permission for anyone, Yemeni or foreigner, who wishes to visit the Jews. Getting permission required me to navigate Yemen's formidable bureaucracy, a process taking days. Once I had received the permission letters, actually record-

ing the folklore proved a challenging and often frustrating endeavor in its own right. Equipment was unavailable or hard to find; storytellers were noncommittal, and they often promised to meet at a later time, only to ignore my calls when that time came. However, after all the phone tag and bureaucratic hoops, the project came through, and I left Yemen with hours of stories recorded with professional-quality sound and video.

With the death of a language, so too dies a community's history, myths, stories, ideas, tragedies, celebrations, and perception of the world. The Jewish community in Yemen will not remain forever. I am glad to say I could be a part of the process of documenting and recording those words before they are gone. 

? The stories I know best, those from the Hebrew Bible, are the first "Jewish" stories. They tell us about great leaders. Abraham palms his wife off as his sister to save his skin. He gets rewarded, but not before the foreign king, Avimelech, (in the second version) reproaches first God and then Abraham with a rather astounding claim: "Things that should not be done you have done to me." (Genesis 20:9) David, greatest hero, beloved of God, is caught in behavior unfit for a king, at least a king who rules the people of God. He, too, is roundly reproached. Each story insists we form our own judgments, giving us details but not necessarily the narrator's view. God's judgment may also be absent.

A "Jewish" story, then, is willing to submit even the most powerful to scrutiny. It insists that we read with a moral compass, and, while entertaining, it is never indifferent to what unfolds in front of us. Yet Jewish skepticism of power is hardly unique. Tolstoy's parody of Napoleon on the eve of battle, or Dicken's contempt for the lawyers of the chancery come readily to mind.

Adriane Leveen is assistant professor of Bible at HUC-JIR in New York.



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Our Homes, Our Story

LAUREN BAHARY WILNER, ADAM EILATH,
& JASON GUBERMAN-PFEFFER

The Jewish narrative, as any other, has an evolving story line, composed of the interplay between history and memory. Twenty-first-century digital mapping technology affords a unique opportunity to enhance our understanding of this narrative by making thousands of Jewish heritage sites not just visible, but “visitible.”

Diarna, “Our Homes” in Judeo-Arabic, is a project that harnesses technology, particularly Google Earth, to provide virtual access to the sites of our endangered Jewish heritage across the Middle East and North Africa. In the case of writer Lamaan Herdoon, who left Iraq in the 1970s, and dreamt of returning to Baghdad, Diarna enables the realization (if only virtually) of a dream long deferred:

I wish that I could fly like a bird with my daughters and show them the home where I grew up, my school, Frank Iny, the college I attended, Baghdad University, Abu Nawas Street, the Tigris River, and our synagogue...

For thousands of years, Jews lived in communities from the edge of the Sahara in Southern Morocco to the Iranian-Afghani border. In the past few decades, and vividly illustrated recently with the flight of many members of Yemen’s dwindling Jewish community, most of these ancient communities have ceased to exist in essence or in fact. But while community members have left, their former structures and sites remain behind. Digitally mapping these places provides insight into the lives and stories of past and current inhabitants, as well as a tangible mechanism for preserving and exploring memories and history.

Documenting sites in this manner also creates an image of one’s heritage not wholly available through text, photos, or stories alone. For Lauren, Diarna enlivens her mother’s roots in a country she couldn’t imagine visiting now, the Islamic Republic in Iran. “I have studied Farsi; I have attempted Persian cooking; and I wear my great-grandmother’s jewelry to try to connect with my identity. But when will it be safe for me to visit the neighborhood where my grandparents met? Now I have a virtual passport to experience the sweep of 2,700 years of Jewish life in Iran.”

Until recently, there existed very limited geographic documentation, in either scholarly or popular works, on the physical parameters of Mizrahi communities. However, today, Google Earth makes available a freely downloadable program that supplies interactive satellite imagery of the entire globe to an audience in excess of 500 million users.

On our Web site, we weave and synthesize satellite imagery (complete with terrain, zoomable perspectives, tiltable views, and 360-degree rotation), archival and contemporary photos and videos, audio- and video-oral histories, panoramas, and even three-dimensional models, to create compelling entry points to these once vibrant, yet largely forgotten communities. Anyone with an Internet connection can travel across the region as if on eagles’ wings, unaffected by the political and interreligious strife on the ground, which often thwarts physically preserving, and even (in too many cases) simply visiting these sites.

Over time, these sites are physically disappearing. And they are at risk of being forever lost both to history and memory as the last generation with personal memories passes on. This reality, as well as the dearth of information on, and accessibility to, Mizrahi heritage sites has left us (in a sense) as orphans, disconnected from an essential aspect of our identity. The story of who we are, individually and as a people, is rooted in the Middle East’s soil. One of our researchers, Adam, whose mother’s family is from the rural village of Nabeul, Tunisia, yearned to discover

Adam Eilath and Lauren Bahary Wilner are Diarna researchers based in Jerusalem, where they are recording oral histories of Mizrahim.

Jason Guberman-Pfeffer is the project coordinator of Diarna and executive director of Digital Heritage Mapping, Inc., the project’s parent nonprofit agency. To begin your free trip — no passport or airfare required — explore Diarna’s Web site, <http://www.diarna.org>.



Rather than asking what makes a story Jewish, we should ask how our stories make us Jews.

Telling any story is a basic way to make sense of the flow of events in our own lives. Hearing or reading a story presents us with a way to frame our own lives or the lives of others. To the extent that we tell and retell, engage or contest tales of slavery, freedom, covenant, exile, or redemption, we write ourselves into the Jewish narrative. We become the stories we tell.

Chava Weissler is Philip and Muriel Berman Professor of Jewish Civilization at Lehigh University.

what Jewish life in Nabeul had been like, only to find that “hardly anyone in my family could give me a good sense of that and, even if they did, the line between myth and history was blurred. It was not until I realized that I could see the places where my family had lived for centuries that this almost mythical place became real.”

Diarna marks a beginning toward preserving and reconstructing a more comprehensive, interactive, and “living” exploration of the

heartland of Jewish heritage. In the process, we are, moreover, creating a prototype for digital preservation that can be replicated for Jewish sites in Europe (where thousands of sites are similarly endangered), as well as the cultural heritage sites of other ethnic groups and civilizations around the world. Contrary to the age-old reality, memory may no longer be a place where only those who have been before can go; now, we can all return home. 

Ethics continued from page 20

The standing definition of kosher meat is that it comes from a kosher animal that is slaughtered according to the laws of kashrut and passes a kosher inspection. How the farm or factory that supplies the meat treats its workers and animals are all nonfactors. So when the nonkosher meat industry adopted industrial practices, the kosher meat industry followed suit.

To be designated “organic” means that animals eat organic feed and do not receive hormones or antibiotics; it says nothing about how the animals or factory workers are treated. In fact, these “industrial organic” systems have many of the same issues as conventional plants. A more important distinction is between

meat that is industrially produced and meat that has been produced sustainably from family farms that do not use feedlots.

At KOL Foods, I hope to put ethics — the moral code of how animals are raised for slaughter — and kashrut back on the same plate. We should eat in a way that honors the Earth and the life that was taken in order for us to eat. We can all help do this by pressuring the kosher meat industry to raise its standards; eat consciously — that is, bless the food and reflect on how it came to the table; eat sparingly — eating meat will feel more special if it’s eaten only on holidays and Shabbat; don’t swallow your ethics — consume only sustainable, non-industrial meat. 

Create a Salon in Your Community

Add to the culture of learning in your community! It's easy!

The **Sh'ma Salon** is a forum for adults to use the journal *Sh'ma* as a tool and a vehicle for discussing issues of contemporary Jewish thought. The *Sh'ma* Salon does not require prior Jewish knowledge or in-depth reading on the part of the coordinators, presenters, or participants.

- The Salon creates inclusive conversations.
- The Salon is a formal, moderated, small-group discussion on specific issues facing contemporary Jews.
- The Salon advances understanding of complicated issues.
- The Salon creates a dialogue built on mutual respect and intellectual excitement about our differences.
- The Salon offers opportunities to teach and be taught, to listen and be listened to, to inspire and be inspired.
- The Salon creates a laboratory for sharing innovative and thoughtful ideas.



Contact Susan Berrin, editor of *Sh'ma*, for more information: SBerrin@shma.com
Go online to www.shma.com/salon for a list of topics and guided steps about how to start a **Sh'ma Salon** in your own community.

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Piyutim

What Jewish conversation would you like to have? Send suggestions for future *Sh'ma* topics to SBerrin@shma.com.

Silence and Wondering

SAÏD SAYRAFIEZADEH

Avram's Father's Idols

A YEARLONG
CONVERSATION

Post your comments
on shma.com

Each month over the course of this year, a guest columnist reflects on the *midrash* of Avram destroying the idols in his father's shop. We've asked our writers to think about the idols they must still transcend to "get to Canaan."

His presence remains, though. Even now when I read the newspaper, I will find myself wondering as a matter of reflex what would be his opinion...And then, I do what I can to think independently, which, I suppose, is one of the lessons of that timeless tale of the boy who swung the axe.

It has been almost five years since my father last spoke to me. He is no doubt hurt and disappointed by what I've written about my childhood spent in a small Trotskyist organization known as "the party." "It is an attack on the working class," he would probably say. He is still a leading member of the Socialist Workers Party, after all, living in Brooklyn — just a subway ride away from me — and participating in that never-ending procession of meetings, conferences, and sales of the *Militant* newspaper, whose masthead reads: "A socialist newsweekly published in the interests of working people."

Notwithstanding my father's charm and wit and generosity in picking up the check at dinner, his disappearance from my life has not been such a great loss. I'm happily married and residing in Manhattan in a beautiful apartment that I own, despite having been taught as a child to loathe private property. No, the real loss occurred when my father abandoned my mother and me when I was nine months old. "Mahmoud went off to fight for a world socialist revolution," she would often say by way of explanation. And because this world socialist revolution was imminent, indeed was about to

would greet my mother upon her return home from her unhappy job as a secretary and demand that we go at once to my bedroom so we could reenact the story. Reclining with exhaustion on my bed, my mother would gamely take on every role in the drama, including the cow, the harp, the giant, and, of course, the widow, which is to say, herself. I was only Jack, pulsating with a spectrum of emotions, each one of them in the extreme, as I scampered around the bedroom enduring poverty, banishment, terror, and that final glorious moment when I would descend the beanstalk just steps ahead of the giant and scream for my mother to hand me the axe, which she did without a second to lose, managing to be both giant and mother at once, crying out "Fee, fi, fo, fum!" and "Hurry, Jack! Hurry!" And in my mind, I would swing that imaginary axe and down would come the beanstalk with the giant landing dead in the grass and the harp and goose in my mother's arms, meaning that my mother and I would now live happily ever after. That is, until the next day, when I would accost her once more at the front door of our apartment and lead her by the hand into my bedroom.

While the story of "Jack and the Beanstalk" was obviously a version of the socialist revolution that we dreamed about — eliminating the wealthy oppressor — it was more an indication of my own private desire to triumph over my father and rid him from our home once and for all. Alas, that never quite happened. But when I was sixteen, my mother resigned from the Socialist Workers Party and began to shape a new life for herself. And in my adult years, I would occasionally meet my father for dinner as we tried to get to know one another. But then I started to write and publish pieces about my childhood, and my father stopped speaking to me altogether.

His presence remains, though. Even now, when I read the newspaper, I will find myself wondering as a matter of reflex what his opinion would be. This is how I am able to keep my father close at hand, as my mother did when I was young. And then, with great difficulty, I do what I can to think independently, which, I suppose, is one of the lessons of that timeless tale of the boy who swung the axe. 

occur at any moment, my mother sacrificed almost everything for the party — of which she also was a member — including lots of her time, some of her money, and all of her passion. Most importantly, she maintained a chronic and debilitating worship of my father, which prevented her from ever being able to move on and find someone else. I was doomed, therefore, to a life of fatherlessness. I was also doomed to a home in which my father's absence was as great as his presence.

One summer afternoon when I was four years old, my mother took me to a performance of "Jack and the Beanstalk." I was so affected by what I saw that for many weeks afterward I

Saïd Sayrafiezadeh is the author of *When Skateboards Will Be Free: A Memoir* (The Dial Press, 2009).

Sh'ma — An independent “think tank” of diverse ideas and conversations published online and in print to incubate issues of significance to the Jewish community conversation.

Our Vision

Each month, *Sh'ma* creates a “conversation-in-print” — that is, it brings together an array of voices that cross the spectrum of Judaism: secular and religious, communal and nonpartisan, engaged and dispassionately scholarly. We raise relevant questions thoughtfully and wrestle lovingly with Jewish concerns as we attempt to navigate the intellectual, communal, and spiritual challenges of contemporary Judaism. Our focus is on ideas — their complexity, their range, and their power. *Sh'ma* is a vibrant intellectual arena that hosts intelligent and creative conversations about ideas that reside outside of any particular institution. Our readers open *Sh'ma* to find what they cannot find elsewhere — concise, accessible, informative, and intelligent discussion of Jewish issues. Sometimes focusing on personal belief, other times on communal policy issues, we look to *Sh'ma* for incisive articles that illuminate a range of opinions.

Who are Sh'ma Readers?

“They are deeply committed to Jewish tradition and Jewish continuity; spiritually curious and at times adventurous; at home, at least to some extent, with the world of Jewish texts and the texture of Jewish rituals; appreciative of the many genuine intellectual, ethical, and political benefits of secular modernity, though not unaware of its fraught relationship with Jewish life; people for whom their Jewish identity is a vital component in an ongoing process of self-creation and expression by the light of their understanding of morals, community, and spirituality, a process they share with other families of humanity, and with concerned individuals everywhere.”

Yehudah Mirsky, Fellow at the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute

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- Paul Mendes-Flohr on Martin Buber
- Eli Lederhendler on lines that can't be crossed
- Roberta Seid and Hadar Susskind on Israel
- Amy Eilberg on embracing difference
- Shaul Magid on dogmas in American Judaism
- Shlomo Fischer on Israel's army
- And an array of short reflections on assessing personal boundaries & convictions

CORRECTION: Numbering Sh'ma

Please correct the numbers on the last few issues of *Sh'ma*:

December 2009 should be 40/665

January 2010 should be 40/666

February 2010 should be 40/667

CORRECTION: Sh'ma February

The opening sentence of Maya Bernstein's essay, which stated that it is 80% more likely that Bay Area Jews will create a bar or bat mitzvah ritual themselves than celebrate it at a synagogue, is not factually accurate. What is accurate is the following: 80% of Bay Area Jews are not affiliated with the area's existing Jewish institutions, but identify as Jewish.

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Ethics Sigi Ziering

This year, our Sigi Ziering column focuses on the ethics of kashrut. Each month, an esteemed guest columnist will wrestle with what Jewish texts and our tradition teach us about the food we eat: the preparation of food, the people who prepare our food, the food and restaurants that are deemed kosher. This column is sponsored by Bruce Whizin and Marilyn Ziering in honor of Marilyn's husband, Sigi Ziering, of blessed memory. Visit shma.com to view the series and responses.

Devora Kimelman-Block is the founder and CEO of KOL Foods, the nation's only retailer of nonindustrial, grass-raised kosher beef, lamb, and poultry.

A native of Chicago, she is a founding member of Eastern Village Cohousing in Silver Spring, Md., where she lives with her husband, Jason, and their three children, Esther, Natan, and Simone.

Sustainable Agriculture

DEVORA KIMELMAN-BLOCK

A year ago, I found myself in inner-city Baltimore, shoveling manure into a garbage bag in a gas station parking lot. The gas station attendants were none too pleased when my farmer's trailer, with live cattle in the back, pulled in and, accidentally, deposited a pile of dung that had slid out under the door. Not okay to put it in their garbage cans, they said. We had to take it with us.

Welcome to my world. I never thought this would be part of my Jewish journey. How, you may ask, did I find myself shoveling manure in a gas station parking lot? I am the founder of KOL Foods, which makes available and promotes sustainable food systems. Specifically, I provide kosher beef, lamb, and now poultry. Less than ten USDA certified slaughterhouses remain in the United States that kill their animals according to the laws of kashrut. I work with one of those slaughterhouses in downtown Baltimore, which has been family owned and operated since the 1800s.

Sustainable agriculture is a way of producing food in which animals are treated humanely and the environment, farm, and factory are healthy for workers and consumers. Before industrialization, animals were raised in organic pastures, and the meat, which was expensive, was considered a treat.

Today, the focus at industrial animal farms is on gaining short-term profit — with minimal concern for the environment, workers, animals, or the consumer's health. Such farm production raises several environmental issues, including the pollution of U.S. waterways. Public health issues, listed below, are staggering:

- Waste matter causes food-borne illness (like *E. coli*), and, in the United States alone, sickens 76 million people and kills 5,000 people every year.
- Cattle and lamb are ruminants; their native diet is grass. When they eat grain, it makes their internal organs acidic, which makes their *E. coli* much more toxic for humans.
- A 1998 *Consumer Reports* study revealed that 71 percent of store-bought chicken was contaminated with salmonella. The recent outbreak of salmonella in peanuts has been traced to factory meat farms whose manure was spread on fields and then seeped into waterways.
- While studies have warned that eating conventional red meat lowers one's life expectancy, many doctors recommend eating grass-fed meat (without antibiotics or growth hormones) that is rich in heart-healthy Omega-3 fatty acids and cancer-fighting CLAs.

In addition to the health issues are animal and worker welfare concerns. For example, animals are crammed together in confined areas without access to sunlight and fresh air; their feet don't even touch the ground. Workers experience dangerous conditions, including exposure to dust and gases, as well as workplace injuries.

Factory farms produce lots of really cheap meat. While the low cost can be advantageous to consumers, it does not reveal the actual costs to our society, our environment, or our Jewish values. *continued on page 17*