

Hasidic Stories

Contributed by [Liz Alpern](#)

Source: <http://www.jewishlights.com/PDF's/HasidicTales.pdf>

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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