

Storytelling in Jewish Tradition

Source sheet compiled by Adira Rosen

June 2025



Psalms 33:6

(6) By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, by the breath of His mouth, all their host.

The Morning Prayers, Baruch She'amar

Blessed is He Who spoke and the world came into being,

בְּרוּךְ שֶׁאָמַר וַהֲיָה הָעוֹלָם

- What does it mean that the world was created with words?
- How does that inform your understanding of the power of language?

Telling Stories By Yanki Tauber

All living creatures communicate with each other in some way. But only humans tell stories... This is why, explain the Chassidic masters, the Talmud considers the "toil of speech" a most basic component of man's special role as a "partner with G-d in creation." G-d created an awesome, intricate, yet in many ways a still-undefined world; our storytelling completes the work of Creation, imparting to it coherence and significance.

- How does this source shape your understanding of the spiritual significance of storytelling?
- How does this change your understanding of what it means to be creative?
- In what ways do you tell stories in your life? With spoken words, written words, art, music, dance, with friends, in front of an audience, etc...

The Importance of Storytelling by Rabbi Maya Y. Glasser

The Jewish people love to share stories, as memory is a central Jewish value. We cannot forget what has happened to us because we must share it with future generations... Though our history of slavery under Pharaoh is a familiar one, recalled every year during Passover, it is not comfortable. It is painful to hear about how our people were oppressed by Pharaoh and acknowledge that oppression still continues in contemporary times. We don't like to think about our ancestors working long hours in horrible conditions; it is tragic to contemplate the senseless murder of innocent people. Yet, this story is a significant part of our past. Tradition tells us that not only do we need to hear about what happened to earlier generations, we must also put ourselves into the text. Researcher Lisa Moss-Phillips writes, "The Jews are a storytelling people... Storytelling is a rich part of our Jewish tradition and continues to be an ongoing, effective way of transmitting a cultural heritage and... sharing values."... Being a "storytelling people" means not just discussing happy memories or what brings us pride about our story, but continuing to pass down all of it, even the challenging parts that we'd prefer to shy away from.

- What role does memory play in your life?
- How do you feel when hearing the stories about your Jewish ancestors in the Torah? How about Jewish ancestors you knew or those who your family knew?

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Peninei Halakhah, Pesach 15:5:2

On four occasions the Torah states that one must tell his child about the Exodus from Egypt, and each time it uses a different formulation. This teaches us that one must tailor his storytelling to the abilities and personality of each child.

- What does this teach you about the role of the audience/listener?
- How do your stories change based on the person listening to your story?

A Nation of Storytellers by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

The great questions – “Who are we?” “Why are we here?” “What is our task?” – are best answered by telling a story. As Barbara Hardy put it: “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.”[4] This is fundamental to understanding why Torah is the kind of book it is: not a theological treatise or a metaphysical system but a series of interlinked stories extended over time, from Abraham and Sarah's journey from Mesopotamia to Moses' and the Israelites' wanderings in the desert. Judaism is less about *truth as system* than about *truth as story*. And we are part of that story. That is what it is to be a Jew.

- How does this source/source sheet shape your understanding of Torah?
- How do these sources shape your understanding of what it means to be a Jew?