

Insights from Rabbis & Prophets about Story

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According to a well-received Jewish tradition, it was King Solomon who, if not invented, popularized **the parable**, at least in Israel. “The Torah until Solomon’s time,” commented Rabbi Nachman in the *Aggada*, “was comparable to a labyrinth with a bewildering number of rooms. Once one entered there, one lost his way out. Then along came Solomon and invented the parable that has served as a ball of thread. When tied at the entrance to this labyrinth it serves as a secure guide through all the winding, bewildering passages.”¹

Taking up the thought, Rabbi Nachman’s colleague, Rabbi Hanina, said:

Until the time of Solomon the Torah could have been compared to a well full of refreshing water, but because of its extraordinary depth no one could get to the bottom. What was necessary was to find a rope long enough to tie to the bucket in order to bring up the water. Solomon made up this rope with his parables and thus enables everyone to reach to the profoundest depths of the well.²

Indeed, Story gives us “a rope long enough” to reach the depths. So actually, re-digging the wells of Story may actually mean simply reaching the bottom of the already existing wells of salvation. Poet Emily Dickinson put it well in saying, “Tell all the truth, but tell it slant.” Often modern Western preachers and teachers think of stories as mere illustrations or “icing on the cake” of a lecture type sermon. The real cake, the substance they think, is the more abstract, propositional truth in logic, told in bald statement-of-fact form. Rabbi Hanina knew that stories were the rope that reaches to the profoundest depths of the well.

Rabbi Jacob ben Wolf Kranz of Dubno, known as the “Dubner Maggid,” was a Lithuanian-born preacher who lived from 1740 to 1804. “*Maggid*” is Hebrew for storyteller (from the same Hebrew root as “*Aggadah*” and “*Haggadah*”). A contemporary of the Vilna Gaon, the “*Maggid*” was famous for explaining Torah concepts by using a *mashal* or parable. Moses Mendelssohn named Kranz, “the Jewish Aesop.”³ The Dubner Maggid was once asked, “Why do you always tell stories? Why are stories so powerful?” Kranz’s legendary reply was to answer by telling the following story. It is a story about the power of stories, called “Truth & Story”:

¹ Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People* (New York: Crown Publisher's, Inc., 1948), 56.

² Ausubel, ed., *Treasury*, 56.

³ Eliezer Steinbarg, ed., *The Jewish Book of Fables* (Dora Teitelboim Center for Yiddish Culture, 2003), xii.

There was once a poor old woman. She was, well... ugly... very ugly. She had a bent back and hooked nose. Her chin was covered with warts and pimples. Her eyes bugged out. Her mouth was crooked and her teeth broken. She dressed in old rags that smelled. No one would listen to what she said or even look at her. If they saw her they would run away . . . slam doors in her face. So she was very sad because all she wished for was some company, some companionship. But no one would pay attention to her or talk to her. So she wandered from place to place looking for friends.

She crossed a great desert and came to a city in the middle of the desert. She thought to herself “Surely I’ll find friends in this city. People in the desert know how hard life is and will take pity on me, and I’ll find a friend.” But, alas, this city was like all the rest. People ran away and slammed doors or closed their shutters. No one would talk to her or listen to her. She became very upset. “Why go on? What’s the point? Life is too hard. I think I should just give up on life” So she wandered out of the city and sat down on the dusty road just outside the city. She waited, watching life pass her by.

Before long a good-looking young man dressed in beautiful clothes arrived in the city and received a great reception. The people came out to shake his hand. Some even hugged him. They brought him food and drink and lavished him with gifts. The old woman said, “Life is so unfair. When you are young and good looking, everyone loves you, but when you are old, ugly and sick, they forget you and ignore you. It is so unfair!” After a while the young man gathered up his gifts, said “Good-bye,” and headed out of the city. He stopped on the dusty road and sat down opposite the old woman to pack up his gifts.

The old woman could keep her tongue no longer, “What is going on? What’s with you? Is it like this everywhere you go? Do you always get treated so well?”

The young man blushed and said, “Well... yes... I guess... Everywhere I go they treat me well.”

“Well, why? Why?! You must be someone special! Someone extraordinary,” said the old woman.

The young man said, “Oh, no, Ma’am! Actually, I am quite ordinary.”

“I don’t believe it. You must be an emperor, a king in disguise, or a prince or a general,” she said.

“Oh no...I am not like that...I am very common. You find me everywhere--me and my type,” he said.

“Well then, what are you? said the old woman. “Who are you that people are so happy to see you when you come along?”

“Well, I am a Story, and I think I am a pretty good Story at that. Because people like a good story they are happy to see me. But, old woman, what are you? Who are you? Why don’t people like to see you?” asked the young man.

“Ah, that is the problem. It’s what I am. I am Truth, and nobody likes to hear the truth.

(Narrator: This may seem a bit strange to some of you...but when you think about it what the old woman said is really true, isn’t it? ... If someone said to you, “I’m going to tell you what your friends really say behind your back. Do you really want to hear it? If you are destined to die a horrible death, or to die early, do you really want to know the truth about that? No, some truth is ugly, especially truth about ourselves. We avoid it, we resist it, we don’t want to know it).

The young man said, “I’m sorry about that.” He then began to think how he could help the old woman. “I’ve got an idea, old woman,” he said. “Let’s team up...let’s journey together! You and I can travel together and wherever I go, you’ll go. Anything I am given, I’ll share with you.”

“That won’t work,” she said. “They’ll see me. They’ll take one look and run away from both of us!”

“No, you don’t understand! You’ll hide behind me—behind my cloak. Whatever they give me I’ll share equally with you. Let’s try it.”

The woman agreed, and they partnered up and travelled together. Wherever they went, the old woman hid behind the young man’s cloak, and anything he was given he happily shared with the old woman.

This worked out so well that their arrangement lasts to this very day. That is why to this very day ***the truth always hides behind a good story.***

This story has also been put nicely into verse form by Heather Forest, in “Naked Truth and Parable.”

Naked Truth and Parable

Naked Truth walked down the street one day.
People turned their eyes the other way.

Parable arrived draped in decoration.
People greeted parable with celebration.

Naked Truth sat alone, sad and unattired.
“Why are you so miserable?” Parable inquired.

Naked Truth replied, “I’m not welcome anymore.
No one wants me. They chase me from their door.”

“It is hard to look at Naked Truth,” Parable explained.
“Let me dress you up a bit. Your welcome will be gained.”

Parable dressed Naked Truth in Story’s fine attire,
With metaphor, poignant prose, and plots to inspire.

With laughter and tears and adventure to unveil,
Together they went forth to spin a tale.

People opened their doors and served them their best.
Naked Truth dressed in Story was a welcome guest.⁴

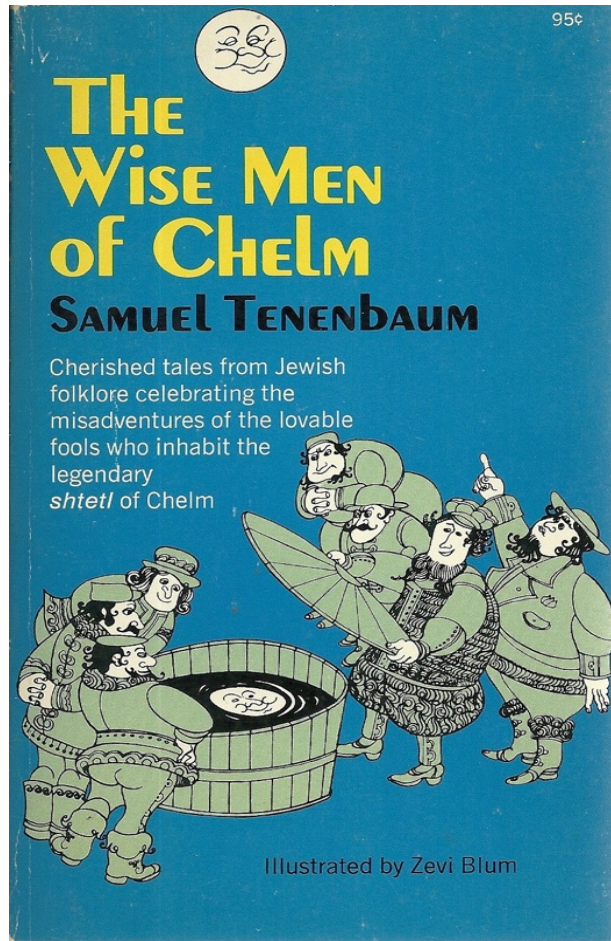
⁴ Heather Forest, *Wisdom Tales From Around the World* (Little Rock: August House, 1996), ii.



There is a long storytelling tradition in Judaism, both for serious moral and religious learning, as well as for fun and entertainment:



Painting of the Wise Men of Chelm, telling stories.



“The Wise Men of Chelm have an iconic and legendary status in the history of Jewish storytelling. According to traditions to have emerged from Eastern Poland, the town of Chelm had a dubious reputation for being incredibly foolish. Whenever the townspeople were confronted with any kind of common everyday problem, its leaders always demonstrated a penchant for overlooking the obvious solutions. Instead, they proposed silly solutions that never worked.” <https://www.rabbimichaelsamuel.com/todays-version-of-the-wise-men-of-chelm/>

A Classic Jewish Folk Tale– Challot in the Ark⁵

Introduction:

This is a classic Jewish folk tale. It is Jewish humor, but not a joke per se. It is light humor that will bring not laughing-out-loud, but rather a smile. Primarily, it is a heart-warming story with

⁵ As told by Rabbi Fred Davidow - <http://scheinerman.net/judaism/Stories/challot.html>

*moral and spiritual applications embedded within. Some historical and cultural background for those that may lack it—The couple in the story are Sephardic Jews who had migrated from Spain after the Expulsion, so likely Ladino and Spanish-speaking. **Challah** (**challot** is plural in Hebrew) is a special Sabbath day bread, braided and often glazed. The **Holy Ark** is the special cabinet in the synagogue that holds the Torah Scroll. The Ark is opened each Shabbat service to be read, and then returned to the Ark after reading. A **shamash** (or shammes) is a worker, usually salaried, who takes care of the synagogue property and records and performs various related practical duties for maintenance of the house of worship. Rabbi **Isaac Luria** (d. 1572) is considered the father of contemporary Kabbalah (mystical teachings), and is nicknamed the “Ari” (the lion). **Tzfat** (Safed) is the city in the Galilee famous for its centers of Kabbalistic practice, to this day.*

In the year 1502, a man named Jacobo, and his wife Esperanza, came to settle in the city of Tzfat, high on a mountain, in the holy land of Israel. Jacobo and Esperanza had been born in Spain, but in 1492, Spain expelled all her Jews. Jacobo and Esperanza, then young and strong, traveled from Spain to Salonika in Greece, where they lived for several years. There they heard of the great rabbi, Isaac Luria, who was known as the Ari, who led the Jews of Tzfat, a community steeped in kabbalah, the mystical teachings. Rabbi Luria taught that God is hidden and mysterious, but can be seen in the actions of those on earth who acknowledge God's creative power and seek to obey God's will. And so, in Salonika, Esperanza and Jacobo boarded a ship and sailed for Eretz Yisrael.

In Tzfat, they found a community of Jews dedicated to serving God, but struggling to feed themselves. One Shabbat, the rabbi, an elderly man, taught the congregation that when the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, before it was destroyed by the Romans, God was offered 12 loaves of bread each week just prior to Shabbat. Jacobo was a simple man, whose honesty, integrity, and kindness far exceeded his learning. He did not understand much of what the rabbi had said, but did remember about the loaves, so when he arrived home, he told Esperanza, "Next Friday morning, let us bake 12 loaves of challah. The rabbi taught this morning that God loves challah for Shabbat. I will bring them to the synagogue and give them to God."

Now Esperanza was a wonderful baker, and Jacobo was filled with joy at the thought that he and his wife would be able to please God in this manner. That week, they baked the finest 12 loaves of challah they had ever made. They kneaded the dough with love, expressing their awe of God and their love of mitzvot through their efforts.

When the loaves came out of the oven and had cooled, Jacobo carefully packed them in a burlap sack, hoisted them onto his shoulder, and headed for the

synagogue. When he arrived in the synagogue, he looked around to be certain that no one saw him, then tiptoed to the Holy Ark. Opening the Ark doors and placing the loaves of challah in the Holy Ark, Jacobo whispered, "Senor Dios, I have brought You the challah You love so much. My Esperanza and I made it just for You. Tomorrow, on Shabbat morning, when they open the Ark to take out the Sefer Torah, I am going to look to see if they are gone -- every crumb -- so we will know that You like our gift." With that, Jacobo closed the Ark, drew the curtain closed across it, and tiptoed out of the synagogue.

No sooner had he left, than the shammes entered the room to sweep the floor and prepare the synagogue for Shabbat. When his eye caught sight of the Holy Ark, he put down his broom and approached it. "Lord," he prayed, "I don't ask for much. You know I am not paid for being the shammes of the synagogue. I do this job out of love for You and the Holy Torah. But my children are hungry. I need food for them. Even if the people of Tzfat cannot pay me, perhaps You can feed my children, Lord." It was then that the shammes noticed the enticing aroma of warm bread emanating from the Ark. Impulsively, he took a step forward and opened it. Gasping, he exclaimed, "My Lord, a miracle! I knew You would feed my children, just as we pray *ha-maycheen mazon le-chol b'riotav*. Oh, thank you, Lord, thank you so much!"

The shammes gathered the challot and ran home to his wife, who was overjoyed to see the food for their children. They decided to eat two challot that evening for their Erev Shabbat meal, two challot for lunch after they davened the next morning, two more for later in the afternoon at Se'udah Shlishi, and save one for each day of the coming week. "Next week, we shall see what happens," the shammes's wife told him, for her faith was strong.

The next morning, the congregation assembled in the synagogue to celebrate Shabbat. Jacobo waited eagerly for the Ark to be opened. He grew more and more anxious. Would the challot still be there? Had God accepted their gift? Had God enjoyed the challot? When the rabbi opened the Ark, Jacobo's prayer was answered. There was not a crumb in the Ark! "Baruch hashem! Thank God!" he prayed, and smiled at Esperanza.

As soon as three stars appeared in the sky, Esperanza and Jacobo made Havdalah to end Shabbat and set about discussing their plans to bake challot for God every Friday morning. The following Friday, they removed 12 beautiful challot from their oven, wrapped them in burlap, and took them quietly to the synagogue. Jacobo checked that no one was about before placing them lovingly in the Holy Ark. A short time later, the shammes came to clean the synagogue and, approaching the Ark, found his challah waiting for him, still warm from the oven.

This scene repeated itself each week, just before Shabbat, for thirty years.

One Friday morning, as Jacobo was placing the challah in the Ark, as he had done every week for three decades, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see the rabbi, now a very old man. "What are you doing?" the rabbi shouted at him angrily. "What do you mean by putting bread in the Holy Ark?"

"I bring these challot to God every week," Jacobo stammered. "I have been doing this for 30 years."

"You have been bringing bread to God each week for 30 years?" the rabbi asked in amazement. "Whatever for?"

"Because of what you taught," replied Jacobo, and he recounted what he remembered of the rabbi's sermon about the loaves of bread in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

"You fool! God doesn't eat food like people!" said the rabbi.

"Ah, you are learned and wise," said Jacobo, "but you don't know everything. You see, every week God accepts our gift of challah. For 30 years, there hasn't been a crumb left in the Ark come Shabbat morning."

Now the rabbi was curious, so he said, "Jacobo, let us hide in the back of the synagogue and see just what happens to your challot." So the two men hid behind the last row of benches and waited patiently. They didn't have long to wait.

Several minutes later, the shammes entered the room and immediately approached the ark. Opening the door, he prayer, "Lord, for 30 years you have fed my family and sustained us in good times and bad. We give you thanks."

The rabbi jumped up and screamed, "You, too, are a fool! Do you think that God bakes bread and leaves the loaves in the Ark?"

The shammes hung his head in shame and began sobbing. "I don't get paid for cleaning the synagogue, Rabbi. I thought this was God's way of repaying me for my work."

At just that moment, Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Ari, walked into the synagogue and, hearing the loud and angry voice of the rabbi and the sobbing of the shammes, asked what was happening. The shammes was miserable because he knew he would never find challah in the ark again. Jacobo was miserable because he had simply wanted to please God and now he could no longer do this.

When the entire story had been explained to him, Rabbi Luria smiled and turned first to the rabbi. "Rabbi, never since the Destruction of the Temple, has God had such pleasure as from watching what has gone on in your synagogue each week. Thirty years ago, you were an old, sick man and God had decreed that you would soon die. But since your teaching resulted in so much righteousness on the part of these people, God wanted you to live."

Then the Ari turned to Jacobo and the shammas. "Now that you know who is eating the challot, it will be more difficult to continue as you have for 30 years. But I want you to continue as you have, and believe with perfect faith that if you, Jacobo, bring your challot directly to the shammas, God will be pleased no less than before, for it is through acts of love and kindness that we serve God and repair the world. And you" the great Ari turned to the shammas, "know that these challot were baked by Jacobo and Esperanza, but they come from God, as well, because Jews are commanded to do the work of God in this world, feeding the hungry and binding the wounds of those who suffer."

From that day on, Esperanza and Jacobo baked a dozen loaves of challah each Friday, as they had for three decades, and brought it to the home of the shammas, who gratefully accepted the loaves.

And so it was... and so it is...



* **Reflection:** The endearing Jacobo did not get his theology or doctrine quite right about the *Showbread* (Hebrew: **לֶחֶם הַפָּנִים** *lechem ha panim*, literally: "Bread of the Face/ the Presence") offered by the priests in the Holy Place in Temple in Jerusalem (Exodus 25:30). The 12 loaves of showbread were set out each Sabbath, one for each tribe, to symbolize that Israel was sustained constantly under the watchful face and care of God (not to feed Israel's God as food offered in shrines to pagan gods often was). The bread was eaten by the priests each Sabbath (Leviticus 24:5-9). But Jacobo's heart was right. He was making an offering in sincere faith and devotion to God.

And the shames also had a heart of faith. He prayed for provision of food for his family and he believed God was continually answering his prayer, week by week.

When the truth was found out, the rabbi at first rebuked both Jacobo and the shames for their bad theology. The rabbi was, of course, theologically correct. And when it was exposed both the Jacobo and the shames that there was a natural human explanation for this provision and disappearance of the challot each week, surely their faith in the miraculous provision of God was shattered.

This disillusionment of believers has often been the case in modern era as scientific explanations have been discovered for things that previously were thought to be acts of God and supernatural. Where there was a gap in understanding the natural world, God was invoked as the answer. When scientific knowledge of natural laws increased, God's role and that of miracles, receded. For example, in the modern creationism vs. biological evolution debate.

Or consider the story of Joseph in Genesis— there were naturalistic explanations for how Joseph got to Egypt (betrayed by his brothers). But at the end of the story, Joseph has the insight that *“you meant it as evil against me, but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive”* (Genesis 50:19-20). Like in the story of Queen Esther, the providential hand of God often works through natural and even evil human actions to bring about his purposes.

In this story, the mystical, spiritually receptive Rabbi Luria has deeper insight than the theologically correct rabbi. He sees the hand of God nevertheless in the natural causes and effects. And he affirms and commends all three characters, the rabbi for his good teaching, Jacobo for his devotion and acts of love, and the shames he exhorts to continue to believe that the provision of bread was coming from God, even though it was mediated by Jacobo and Esperanza.

Surely this is New Testament faith. Jesus taught that in giving to his brothers, we give to him— *“And the King will say, ‘I tell you the truth, when you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you were doing it to me!’”* (Matthew 25:40 NLT). By giving the challot as offering to God, even though it actually was going to feed the shammes and his family, Jacobo can know he was still giving to God!

And the shammes, can know this about the gifts of daily bread he received— *“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”* (James 1:17 NIV).

And the theologically correct rabbi can know that his solid orthodox teaching through the years did produce righteousness in those who listened to him. And that it even ministered to those of his congregation who were not scholars; who did not listen too well to his sermons, and so didn't quite get their doctrine right, but their hearts and their faith were right.

Can you see the hand of God in the natural causes and effects around you?

Are you a pastor or teacher who, like the rabbi, sometimes despairs of your students or congregational members grasping your teaching or preaching?— can you trust that your ministry is producing spiritual fruit in ways you cannot currently see? Do you have any Jacobos and Esperanzas in your congregation? Do you have a deacon in your church like this shammes? If so, affirm them, be grateful for them.

Have you been available to be a channel of God’s love and grace and truth, as were the Jacobo & Esperanza or as the shammes lately?

“Let Me Write the Songs of a Nation....”

“Let me write the songs of a nation and I care not who writes their laws.”

“Let me make the ballads of a nation, and I care not who makes its laws.”

The above are two variations on this saying are attributed to Andrew Fletcher (1653–1716), a Scottish writer, politician, and patriot. As a politician, he was a keen observer of what it takes to start a movement of social change, even revolution, in a society. Songs are surely more effective than laws to change the hearts and minds of the masses. **Ballads are stories put to song.**

A good story is powerful in itself. Put it to music and verse and it heightens the power to cast vision, to inspire, to impress upon the memory and to motivate social movements. If you want to know what people hold as valuable, look to the songs.

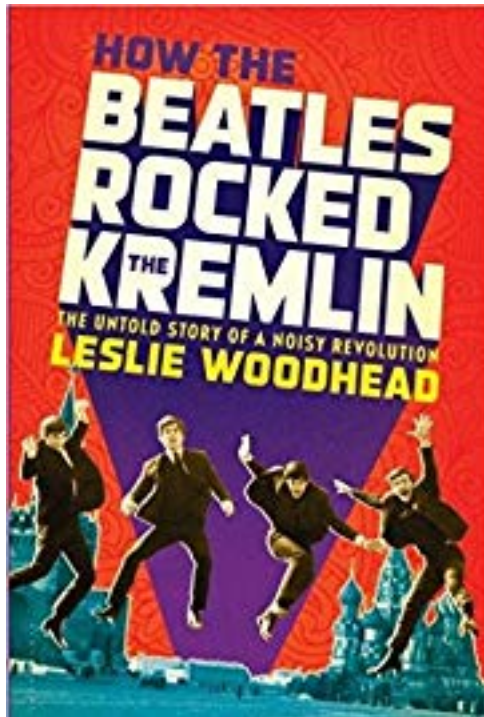
King Saul, Israel’s first monarch, found this out as the increasingly storied David was celebrated in the streets, the women singing and dancing to,

*“Saul has slain his thousands,
David his ten thousands.”*

The story became a ballad that permeated and mobilized the whole culture. King Saul correctly observed after this, that “Now what more can he [David] have but the kingdom?” (1 Sam. 18:6-8). Saul’s “law” had been overtaken by the songs of the people.

For a culture-change phenomenon from our times, consider how powerfully the music of the 1960s (the debut of rock and roll to the masses) both expressed and shaped the culture then and until the present time. It is often underestimated just how powerfully that music shaped late modern culture. Award-winning British documentary film maker, Leslie Woodhead, produced a documentary entitled **“How the Beatles Rocked the Kremlin”** aired by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC).⁶ In 2009 WNET produced a documentary showing how the Beatles’ music was a strong factor contributing to the collapse of the USSR. The film argues persuasively that their music—banned in the USSR and bootlegged by teenagers—inspired dreams of hope and freedom of expression for a whole generation, which eventually led to the demise of communism. Little did the dour totalitarian rulers of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics know that their iron laws would be brought down (at least in part) by songs.

⁶ <http://www.thirteen.org/beatles/video/video-watch-how-the-beatles-rocked-the-kremlin/>.



The Psalms are Israel’s Song Book. They have been profitably put to music ever since the days of King David, by Jews and Christians. The Psalms express “*an anatomy of all parts of the soul,*” according to John Calvin.⁷ This feature of the Psalms is a major reason for their endurance and widespread popularity of the Psalms in every Jewish and Christian tradition. They help us express our souls *vertically*, to God. What if we could put the stories of Scripture into the contemporary and beloved and popular forms of music as inspired ballads, and into more dramatic visual and film media to express these stories (which reach all parts of the soul) *horizontally*, to society today? Think of the potential impact for the Gospel and for culture change!

The Nathan Principle

What follows is a Biblical example of truth hiding behind a good story. Imagine with me: Had Nathan the prophet approached King David, after his sin with Bath Sheba, and told him the propositional truth—“You have committed adultery and murder, O King. You have broken four of the Ten Commandments.” Would the King have readily received this bald truth? Likely not. He may have rid himself of this troublesome prophet. Off with his head! He did not want to hear

⁷ John Calvin, *A Commentary On the Psalms of David* (Oxford: Talboys, 1840), 1: vi.

the ugly, naked truth. But instead of presenting him with the naked truth, Nathan told him a story,

“There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him” (2 Sam. 12:1-14 ESV).

This story brought David into a house and opened a window for him to see. He could see vividly the injustice done. David bought into the story. He was caught in the powerful rhetorical trap of the story. The King became enraged and said, “*As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die! ... and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity*” (2 Sam. 12:5, 6). David thus judged himself. Nathan said, “*You are the man!*” Nathan has opened a window, which became a mirror to David. Herein is the power of story to bring truth home to the heart and core of a person.

A story is an oblique way of coming at truth and helpful in getting past the defenses of a hearer or audience. The late Bible storyteller and trainer Dorothy Miller calls this:

“The Nathan Principle,”⁸ and adds this word as explicating its effect, “See, the Word of God is alive! It is at work and is sharper than any double-edged sword—it cuts right through to where soul meets spirit and joints meet marrow, and it is quick to judge the inner reflections and attitudes of the heart” (Heb. 4:12, CJB).⁹ Direct-route communication and processing uses argumentation and confrontation; peripheral-route processing circumvents argumentation and massages a deeper place in the heart. As communications guru Marshall McLuhan said, “the medium is the message” (after he had said “the medium is the message”). This is **critically needed in Jewish evangelism because of the high resistance among Jewish people to direct communication of the Gospel**. This is the “The Nathan principle.”

Let us use storytelling skills in our communication of the smaller stories and Master Story of the Bible today with Jewish people. The Jewish people know that Bible stories are the stories of their people...the stories of Israel. Let’s bring them to life again! These stories are non-threatening to and enjoyable and speak to the heart. Engaging Jewish people with these stories will mean we are helping them engage with God.

⁸ <http://simplythestory.org/oralbiblestories/index.php/practitioner-audio.html>

⁹ Dorothy A. Miller, *Simply the Story Handbook* (Hemet, CA: The God’s Story Project, 2012).