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Inside Stories & the Jewish Narrative

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Is There a Jewish Story?
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Todd Hasak-Lowy &
Jerome A. Chanes**

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