

Rabbinical Glossators of Hebraic Folklore

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Introduction

From time before time man has passed on his guiding hopes, dreams and fears with family and those closest through myth, fable and folktale, employing magi, soothsayers, religious leaders and trusted wise men.¹

Each of the three Abrahamic faiths are guided by sacred texts and recognized creeds. Muslims follow the QU'RAN (or KORAN)² and its Sura that shape their prayer rituals.³ Christians have their Holy Gospel, the Books adopted as the Old Testament and New Testament, and Creeds, principally the Nicene and the Apostles. Jews find their beliefs in the twenty-four books of the TANAKH beginning with the five books of Moses (TORAH),⁴ the "oral TORAH," which includes the TALMUD, the body of Jewish civil and ceremonial law and legend comprising the Mishnah and the Gemara, and the Rabbinic MIDRASH and ZOHAR, among other works.⁵

Each body of believers have molded and in turn been shaped by these fraternal faiths. Christian BIBLE and TORAH scholars relate that the Mosaic literature taken as a whole "reflects the many facets of the life of Israel," which include its many forms of "prose and poetry, myth and legend, folk tale and history, . . . parables and allegories,"⁶ with myth and ritual forming a mutual inter-religious framework.⁷ The QUR'AN, in turn, adopts freely Christian Old Testament and TORAH stories, "often in a guise somewhat different from the Bible," including those of Adam and Eve, the Fall, the disobedience of Satan, and those of the prophetic figures Moses and Abraham.⁸ Other parallels are seen with New Testament writings.⁹

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¹ Use of the masculine personal pronoun is consistent with the historical time of the Abrahamic faiths discussed herein.

² THE KORAN (J.M. Rodwell, transl.)(Everyman 1994); THE KORAN (AL-QUR'AN) by G. Margoliouth and J. M. Rodwell; <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/2800>

³ THE KORAN (J.M. Rodwell, transl.), *id.*; see generally GABRIEL SAID REYNOLDS, THE QUR'AN & THE BIBLE (Yale 2018).

⁴ See *The 24 Books of the Hebrew Bible*, <https://torah.org/learning/basics-primer-torah-bible/>

⁵ THE TALMUD is the textual record of generations of Rabbinic debate about law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation, compiled between the Third and Eighth Centuries and structured as commentary on the Mishnah, with stories interwoven therein. Two principal versions of THE TALMUD are THE BABYLONIAN TALMUD, dating from the Fifth Century, A.D., and the earlier PALESTINIAN or JERUSALEM TALMUD. See *Introduction, THE TALMUD — SELECTIONS FROM THE CONTENTS OF THAT ANCIENT BOOK, THE COMMENTARIES, TEACHINGS, POETRY AND LEGENDS* 293-94(H. Polano, transl.)(Frederick Warne & Co., Ltd., London/New York 1969).

⁶ THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED Bible (Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger eds.) xxxv (Oxford 1977).

⁷ Haviva Pedaya, *The Wandering Messiah and the Wandering Jew: Judaism and Christianity as a Two-Headed Structure and the Myth of His Feet and Soles*, in RELIGION UND POLITIK, Tübingen 76 (Gesine Palmer und Thomas Brose (eds.) (2013); <https://www.academia.edu/10072515/>

⁸ THE KORAN (J.M. Rodwell, transl.) at xxii, xxiii.

⁹ Representative are QUR'AN 2:274 and Matthew 6:3-4; QUR'AN 21:20 and Revelations 4:8; QUR'AN 2:49-64 and Acts 7:36-53, as well as broadly familiar Hebrew sayings, such as "an eye for an eye" (QUR'AN 5:45 and Exodus 21:23-27) and "before the camel will pass through the eye of a needle" (QUR'AN 7:7:38 and Matthew 19:21), collected at THE KORAN (J.M. Rodwell, transl.), *id.* at xxiv.

Taken together, Rabbinical, Christian and Muslim religious literature strives to make adherents “in heart the bolder, in mind the happier, and in spirit the wiser.”¹⁰

The Role of Folklore

Oral, Ritualistic and Written Traditions

Each of the three principal Mosaic traditions have partaken freely of the literature of the others, from sacred texts to folklore and fable. Examples abound. The Gnostic Christians and the Manicheans, an Abrahamic faith in part but not in whole, of the First Centuries A.D. related that “when the soul of the blessed arrives in heaven it is met by saints and angels bearing its ‘vesture of light’ which has been preserved for it.”¹¹ Like receptivity is seen between Judaic and Christian canonical traditions. Medieval Jews and Gnostic Christians alike taught of an androgynous Adam before Eve.¹² In the human origin myth within the *Ha idra zuta, Zohar* “[e]ach soul and spirit, prior to its entering into this world, consists of a male and female united into one being. When they descend upon this earth the two parts separate and animate two different bodies.”¹³ Congruent too are the earliest origins of the Gospel of John and the legends of Malchus and Yochanan, both with origins in approximately 200 C.E.¹⁴ The story of Noah enjoys iterations throughout Jewish, Qur’anic and Christian writings.¹⁵ Similarly broadly told is the pantheistic story of Jonah, or Jonas, son of Amittai and Hebrew prophet.¹⁶

The Judeo-Christian story of Paradise (Genesis 2:4b-3:24) is redolent of folkloric images, including a Tree of Life and a sinister serpent.¹⁷ Broadly, “[t]he motifs of creation, paradise, the flood, and the deliverance of mankind from total destruction were expressed in various myths and legends” within the Yahwist tradition, including the Gilgamesh Epic.¹⁸ Many of the elites, newly Christianized, still shared with Jews and pagans a common Deistic outlook on the world)...¹⁹ The figure of the wandering Jew is a shared creation of Christians and Jews.²⁰

Exegetical Role of Rabbis as Learned Interlocutors

Moreso than for Christians and Muslims, Jewish faith follows oral and written tradition as conveyed by ancient and modern Rabbis. In this way Jews differ from many other faith groupings in their immersive enlistment of Rabbis as learned interlocutors. These traditions, where not specifically ordained by the TORAH, have taken the form of story and fable, with generation upon generation of Rabbis, or Rebbes, in turn, interposing their own interpretations as to what instruction hews most faithfully to God’s wishes for His Chosen People.

Talmudic Glossators

The parable has been a vehicle of storytelling for so long as there have been teachers and students. In one such tale, *The Wilderness Miracle* story of manna from Exodus 16, prompted the students of Rabbi ben Jochai to ask him why the Lord gave the Israelites manna daily when he could have as readily provided it for a year.

¹⁰ Barbara Newman, Review, LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS 25 (February 10, 2022).

¹¹ JOSEPH CAMPBELL, THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES 175-176 (MJF Books, 1949).

¹² JOSEPH CAMPBELL, *id.* at 152-153.

¹³ *Ha idra zuta, Zohar*, i., 91 b, attributed to C.G. GINSBERG, THE KABBALAJ, ITS DOCTRINES, DEVELOPMENT, AND LITERATURE 116 (London, 1920); JOSEPH CAMPBELL, *id.* at 279-280.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 76.

¹⁵ Genesis 6:9b, Sanhedrin 108a (according to the Mishna 107b); *see also* Bereshit 8:19, <https://steinsaltz.org/daf/sanhedrin108/>. There are seven accounts of Noah in THE QUR’AN (7:59-64; 10:71-74; 11:25-49; 23:23-30; 26:1-5-22; 54:9-17; 71:1-28); *see* GABRIEL SAID REYNOLDS, *supra* at 858-59.

¹⁶ Jonah 1.1-2.21, THE OXFORD REVISED ENGLISH BIBLE (New York 1992); Sura 21.86–88, THE QUR’AN Sura 21.86–88; https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/463982/jewish/The-Prophet-Jonah.htm. In Judaism, the story of Jonah represents the teaching of *teshuvah*, which is the ability to repent and be forgiven by God

¹⁷ BERNARD W. ANDERSON, UNDERSTANDING THE OLD TESTAMENT (2d ed.) 173 (Prentiss Hall, 1966).

¹⁸ BERNARD W. ANDERSON, *id.* at 173, 176.

¹⁹ Peter Brown, *The Other Rome*, N.Y. REV. BOOKS 35, Feb. 10, 2022.

²⁰ Haviva Pedaya, philosopher and researcher of Judaism with the Department of Jewish History at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. [www.daat-hamakom.com>team>prof-haviva-pedaya](http://www.daat-hamakom.com/team/prof-haviva-pedaya).

The Rabbi replied with a parable: There once was a king who gave his son a yearly allowance, making the sum available on an appointed day, and it was on this day alone that the King saw his son. The King changed his approach, deciding to give the son his “maintenance” for that day alone, requiring the son to visit his father “with the return of each day’s sun.” “So was it with Israel,” Rabbi ben Jochai instructed: “each father of a family dependent upon the manna provided each day by God’s bounty, for his support and the support of his family had his mind devoted to the Sustainer of Life.”²¹

A story from the PALESTINIAN TALMUD conveys the lesson that appearances can be deceiving, proposing that, “A man may feed his father fattened chickens and inherit hell, and another may put his father to work treading a mill and inherit the Garden of Eden.” “How is it possible for a man to feed his father fattened chickens and inherit hell?” the TALMUD author asks, and responds with this parable:

There was a man who used to feed his father fattened chickens. Once, his father said to him: “My son, where did you get these?” He answered: “Old man, shut up and eat, just as dogs shut up when they eat.”

“Such a man,” the lesson urges, “feeds his father fattened chickens but inherits hell.” “How is it possible for a man to put his father to work in a mill and still inherit the Garden of Eden?” the TALMUD asks, and the father answers:

There was a man who worked in a mill. The king ordered millers to be brought to work for him. Said the man to his father: “Father, you stay here and work in the mill in my place [and I will go to work for the king]. For if insults come to the workers, I prefer that they fall on me and not on you. Should floggings come, let them beat me and not you.” Such a man puts his father to work in a mill and yet inherits the Garden of Eden.”²²

In a tale from the PALESTINIAN TALMUD illustrating the catholic respect of Jews for other Abrahamic faiths, Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach tells of his disciples who purchased a donkey from a gentile, only to later discover that the donkey had a valuable pearl about its neck. The disciples exulted their good fortune in relating this to the Rabbi, exclaiming, “From now on, you will not need to weary yourself [working].” The Rabbi responded with this question, “Did the former owner know about the pearl?” “Of course not,” they answered. So he said to them, “Go and return it.” The students argued that as the error was made by a gentile, and since at that time gentiles were under no injunction to return money to a Jew who made a business mistake, neither should they be under any such obligation. “What do you think?” replied Rabbi Shimon. “That Shimon ben Shetach is a barbarian? Shimon ben Shetach would rather hear ‘Blessed be the God of the Jews’ than gain any profit in this entire world.”²³

In another Talmudic story emphasizing the durability of goodness as a power of example, Rabbi Nachman, dining with his colleague Rabbi Yitzchak, asked for his blessing. Rabbi Yitzchak replied with the story of a traveler journeying through the desert, who came upon an oasis, in which there grew a tree laden with fruit, and at its foot a spring of water. The stranger ate the luscious fruit and rested in its shade. Preparing to continue his journey, he searched for words to bless it, knowing that the fruit, its shade, and the water was already granted it by God the Eternal. “Let me pray then to God,” the traveler said, “that all thy offspring may be as goodly as thyself.” “So it is with thee, my pupil,” responded Rabbi Yitzchak: “How shall I bless thee? Thou art perfect in the law, eminent in the land, respected and blessed with means. My God grant that all thy offspring may prove goodly as thyself.”²⁴

The Weasel and the Well is a particularly tender Talmudic folk tale of a young man who in his journeys became “mutually attached” to a young woman, but to whom he bade farewell when he was obliged to leave her town, the two pledging their “mutual faith,” and promising to wed when “in the course of time, they might be able to marry.”²⁵ Just as the young man asked who would witness their betrothal, a weasel ran by, disappearing into the woods.

²¹ THE TALMUD-SELECTIONS, *supra* n. 4 at 290-91.

²² PALESTINIAN TALMUD, *Kiddushin* 1:7; RABBI JOSEPH TELUSHKIN, THE BOOK OF JEWISH VALUES 188 (Bell Tower, New York 2000).

²³ PALESTINIAN TALMUD, *Bava Mezia* 2:5; RABBI JOSEPH TELUSHKIN, *id.* at 146.

²⁴ THE TALMUD – SELECTIONS, *supra* at 293-94.

²⁵ *Id.* at 319-20.

“This weasel, and this well of water by which we are standing, shall be the witnesses,” he proclaimed. Time passed, and the maiden kept her vow, but the young man married another and was born a son. One day the child, wearying of play, lay down, and a weasel bit him in the neck, leaving the child to bleed to death. Another son was given the couple, but this child, newly able to walk unaided, looked into his home’s well, fell in and drowned. Only then did the father remember his “perjured vow”, and his witnesses, the weasel, and the well. Telling his wife of this, she agreed to a divorce. The story continues: “He then sought the maiden to whom he had promised marriage, and found her still awaiting his return. He told her how, through God’s agency, he had been punished for his wrongdoing, after which they married and lived in peace.”

Neo-Modern Glossators

Rabbi Baruch of Mezhibuzh²⁶ was the grandson of the founder of the Chassidic movement. In *The Fifty Gates*, a story attributed to him, Rabbi Baruch had a student, who frequently visited his rabbi and teacher at regular intervals to discuss his life, his studies, his doubts and his questions. Even after the student had moved to a different town, he returned to Mezhibuzh at regular intervals.²⁷

At one point, the Rabbi realized that he had not seen his student for an unusual length of time, and sensing that something was wrong, he harnessed his wagon and traveled to the student’s house. He addressed the student: “I know what is hidden in your heart! You have passed through all the forty-nine gates of reason. You became horribly entangled in your thoughts. You tried logic, reason, all kind of other sciences and philosophies! Every time you came up with a question, you tried to find an answer as best as you could (this made you pass a ‘gate’). After you passed through the first gate, each additional problem brought you to a second gate, which in turn brought you to a third gate, and so on. Soon you noticed that all of your reasoning and analytical skills invoked still other questions, which led you to discover still other answers, which led you to pass through higher and higher levels of gates. And so you continued on this path, until you arrived at the fiftieth gate. This is the gate that leads one straight down into the abyss from which there is no return.”

“You have now posed and wrestled with questions for which no living man in this world has ever discovered any satisfactory or truthful understanding. If you proceed and continue trying to do so anyway, you will stumble, fail, and fall ever more deeply. There is no return from this abyss!”

The student was stunned that Rabbi Baruch had taken the time, trouble and effort to come in person in order to share his wisdom and show support to his wayward former pupil. The student felt great remorse. He exclaimed: “Please! Don’t just tell me that in order to repent I have to go back all the way to the first gate!”

“No,” answered the Rebbe, “you can’t undo knowledge or experience once you have acquired it, but you can handle it in a different way. When you turn yourself around, you will not be going backwards. You will be standing way beyond the last and fiftieth gate. You will stand in *Faith!*”²⁸

Another Chassidic tale, curated by scholar Menachem Posner, propounds the parable that “As long as one has a friend, no situation is ever hopeless.” In the story *The Kind Noble and the Charlatans*,²⁹ a dejected pauper walked along the road, sad at his family’s inability to marry off his beautiful daughters, each a “gem”. Fine young suitors, each a Torah scholar, visited but declined to pledge their troth, as the family had no money for a dowry, reasoning: “How can we expect a young man to join a family that cannot even contribute a few coins toward the wedding celebration and settling the young couple in a new home?” His entreaties to other fellow Jews were unavailing, as “they too were poverty-stricken and had barely enough to support their own families. And those who had more were overextended, fielding requests from far and near for assistance.” Turning towards his home the dejected pauper paused to lean back against a tree when he heard:

²⁶ 1757–1811.

²⁷ Attributed to Rabbi Baruch (1757–1811) of the Ukrainian region of Mezhibuzh, a center of the Chassidic movement.

²⁸ https://www.chabad.org/blogs/blog_cdo/aid/2204414/jewish/The-Fifty-Gates.htm

²⁹ www.scribd.com/document/332745808; www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo.

“Hey, you! What are you doing here? Don’t you know that you’re trespassing?” The traveler looked up to recognize that he had wandered onto the grounds of a grand manor, and was now face to face with the *poritz*, the proprietor and feudal lord. The pauper exclaimed apologetically: “Oh, I am so sorry, Your Lordship, I was simply wandering around, feeling so alone and dejected about my sorry state of affairs, and I stopped to comfort my aching back against your tree. Please forgive me for taking that simple pleasure, and I will be on my way.”

“Wait a moment,” said the *poritz*, sympathetically, “You look like a man who has suffered in life. Please tell me more. Perhaps I can help you.” “Oh, Your Lordship is too kind,” said the sorrowful traveler. “I was feeling so alone. I am a father of daughters, and I desperately seek means with which to help them get married.” “Dear man,” said the lord, “please take this purse of coins, and marry your daughters in gladness. I am an old man and have all the money I can ever need—it’s the joy of giving that I could use in life. Now go in peace.”

Returned to his village, before long word of the miraculous events spread. On villager exclaimed: “What good fortune. Here’s our chance to get rich. Let’s go to that same estate and try our luck.” Making their way to the manor grounds, the villagers promptly located a well-suited tree and began to rub their backs with vigor. The master of the realm soon came to question them.

“Oh, Sire,” they said, “Please have pity! We were feeling so sad, so alone and so hopeless that we decided to lean against your tree for a while, taking advantage of the opportunity to massage our backs.” “You’re charlatans, both of you,” thundered the lord, “Leave at once!” As they left the garden, one of them summoned up the temerity to question the *poritz*. “How is it,” he queried, “that when our friend was here, you greeted him so kindly, but when we came and told you a similar story, you called our bluff?” “It’s very simple,” replied the *poritz*, “When a man is truly alone and he needs to scratch his back, he has no choice but to lean against a tree trunk. But there are two of you. You could have rubbed each other’s backs. That told me that you weren’t really as needy as you made yourselves out to be.”³⁰

The story *The Scratched Diamond* is based on the folk tale told in the 1700s by Jacob ben Wolf Kranz, Maggid of Dubno.³¹ Whenever a student would ask the Maggid a question, he would respond with a story. One day a student was walking with the Maggid and asked of him. “Rabbi, I have many imperfections, so many faults. How can I change them so I become a better person.” The Maggid bid the student to listen to this story:

There was once a very wealthy king who owned many beautiful things. He had cloth tapestries, piles of gold, and statues made by the very best sculptors in the land. Of all of his belongings, his very favorite possession was the most glorious diamond you can imagine. It was huge—as big around as his hand. And it was pure—clear and flawless, without any marks or blemishes. He loved to go and sit with that diamond, gazing at its beauty and perfection.

One day when the king went to look at his diamond, he discovered to his horror that it had a long, deep scratch. He couldn’t believe his eyes! What could have happened to his flawless diamond? Immediately he sent for all of the best stone cutters and diamond cutters in his kingdom. One by one they came to inspect the diamond. Each looked at it closely and then sadly shook his head. The scratch was too deep. If they tried to polish it they might break the diamond into pieces.

Finally one last diamond carver came before the king. He looked at the diamond closely, gazing at it from every angle. The king watched with bated breath as the diamond carver turned the diamond over and over, pursing his lips and shaking his head. Suddenly the diamond carver’s face broke into a big smile. “I know how to fix this, your majesty!” he announced. “Leave it to me. In two weeks time I will return your diamond to you, better than ever. However, you may not visit me during this time or check on my progress. You must wait until it is finished.”

³⁰ By Rabbi Menachem Posner, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112670/jewish/Fables-Parables.htm

³¹ Dubno is a city located on the Ikva River in Rivne Oblast of western Ukraine. The story is retold by Peninah Schram, Professor of Speech and Drama at Yeshiva University and Member of New York, NY Synagogue B’nai Jeshurun, from *THE HUNGRY CLOTHES AND OTHER JEWISH FOLKTALES* (Sterling2008); <https://archive.org/details/hungryclothesoth0000schr>; <https://www.bj.org/jewish-folk-tales/>

The king was very excited. Soon his flawless diamond would be back with his other lovely things, perfect again, the scratch removed. It took all the king's willpower to resist the temptation to visit the diamond carver to watch him work. As for the diamond carver, day after day, night after night, he brought out his tools to fix that diamond. Bit by bit, he worked on that scratch. It was slow, tedious work. He knew he had to work carefully or the diamond could crack into pieces. Finally the diamond cutter was finished. Carefully he wrapped the diamond in cloth to protect it, and he brought it before the king. "Here it is, your majesty," he said. With a flourish he opened the cloth and presented the diamond.

The king gasped at what he saw. Where there had once been a scratch, a horrible flaw in his precious diamond, there was now an exquisitely beautiful flower carved into the diamond. Unable to polish the scratch out of the diamond, the diamond carver had instead turned the flaw into something beautiful.

The king loved his diamond more than ever. Now when he went to hold it in his hands and gaze upon it, he was reminded that even something imperfect or ugly or flawed can become something exquisitely beautiful. The Maggid of Dubno and his student continued on their walk.³²

Thirteenth Century scriptural interpreter, fabulist and philosopher Rabbi Berechiah ben Natronai ha-Nakdan brought together the fables of Aesop and others to teach moral lessons,³³ stories that are at once antique and exceedingly current. *The Tortoise and the Hare* instructs that one should Never Give Up; *The Ant and the Grasshopper* Work Hard and Play Hard; and *The Dog and the Shadow* Be Happy With What You Have. The stories themselves are literature refined by generations of storytelling, but the telos is instruction to Jews as to attainment and preservation of genuinely spiritual lives.

Modern Rabbis

Contemporary Rabbis and Talmudic scholars today carry the mantle sustained for centuries by Rabbinical tradition. *Who's the Thief*, curated by Mendy Kaminker, is a modern iteration of an ancient story³⁴ In the tale three highly agitated men appeared before King Solomon's court, railing that they had embarked on a business trip with a "a large sum of money" that they buried, planning to excavate it "right after Shabbat," but now it was gone. Declaring that "One of us is a thief," they implored Solomon to have each one swear his innocence, as "That way we'll find out which of us is the thief!" But Solomon knew that the man responsible for this would simply lie, and instead instructed them to return before him the following day.

When the partners returned, Solomon said: "Before we discuss your case, I would like your opinion about a different matter." He put to the three men this problem:

A boy and a girl grew up together, and swore to each other that when they were old enough, they would become husband and wife. At very least, they decided, they'd ask the other's permission before marrying anyone else. Years passed. The girl, forgetting her oath, married someone else. Immediately after the wedding, she remembered her earlier commitment and told her husband about it. He said, 'We can't live as husband and wife until we find that boy and ask him to annul the oath that you swore to each other!'

They took a large sum of money and set out to find her childhood friend. They found him and offered to pay him to annul the oath, but he was a good man, so he wished them a hearty *mazal tov* and refused the money. On their way home, the couple was robbed. 'Please give us back the money,' the woman beseeched the robber, telling him about how good her husband was, being so patient as to let her take care of her oath before they moved in together, and how good the boy she'd grown up with was for refusing to take the money. The robber was touched, and returned the purse."

Solomon continued: "My question is, which of the people in this story was the most praiseworthy?"

³² Adapted from *The Sound of the Shofar* in BENNO HEINEMANN, THE MAGGID OF DUBNO AND HIS PARABLES 193-194 (New York, Philipp Feldheim, Inc., 1967). See also *The Blemish on the Diamond* in NATHAN AUSUBEL, A TREASURY OF JEWISH FOLKLORE 66 (Crown Publishers, Indiana University, 1948).

³³ www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/874-aesop-s-fables-among-the-jews

³⁴ Rabbi, Chabad of Hackensack, NJ., in *Jewish Stories From the Midrash*, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/3119607/jewish/Whos-the-Thief.htm

One of the partners said, “The wife is the most admirable. She kept an oath she made when she was just a girl!” The second partner said: “Her husband is the most praiseworthy. Although he loved his wife, he left home right after his wedding to find that boy, and allowed himself to act as a husband to her only after she was released from her oath.” The third man said, “It’s true, both of them behaved in an exemplary fashion. But the boy was a fool! Why didn’t he take the money when they offered it to him?” “You are the thief!” King Solomon concluded, pointing to the last partner. “When you talk that way about the boy, you show that you have an appetite for money even if you have no right to it. I’m convinced that you stole the money from your partners.” Upon hearing this, the last partner admitted his guilt. The other two “went home satisfied and impressed by the wisdom of King Solomon.”³⁵

As related by Rabbi Hillel Baron in the tale *The Money in the Barrel*,³⁶ there was once a young man living in Prague who struggled to make a living. He eventually convinced his wife that he needed to leave home to seek his fortune elsewhere. He explained that after he made a nice sum of money, he would return home to establish a business:

The young man traveled to another town, and kept in touch with his family. But after a while, he stopped communicating. Eventually, his family began to give up on ever seeing him again—they assumed something must have happened to him.

A wine merchant from Prague, who traveled to the countryside every year to purchase kosher wine at wholesale prices, happened to travel to the place where the young man was living. Arriving at the local winemaker’s shop, he encountered the young man himself. He invited him to sit down and talk, and convinced him to come back home. After the young man agreed, the merchant offered him a ride in his wagon, which by then was filled with the wine he had purchased.

The young man had a bundle of money he had amassed throughout his years away. He began to worry that the merchant’s workers may notice and try to steal it, so he hung the bundle from his neck with the bulge under the back of his shirt. After a while, however, he grew worried about this arrangement too. So when no one was looking, he broke the seal on one of the wine barrels, lowered his bundle into it, and then closed the barrel. Finally, he could relax.

When they arrived in Prague, the businessman said to the young man: “Before I drive you home, let me first drop off the wine at my storage facility.” As the barrels were unloaded, the young man tried to keep track of the barrel with his money so that he could return later to retrieve it.

But as he watched the barrels being unloaded, he saw that every single one of them was sealed. He couldn’t locate the barrel in which he had hidden his money. So he approached the businessman and told him what he had done. “Where is my money now?” he asked. “I see that all the barrels are now sealed.” The businessman became visibly agitated, and said, “How dare you suspect me. I’m sorry but I don’t know where your money is.”

The young man was understandably devastated. He had worked for years to earn this money, and it was the reason he had been separated from his family for all this time. He went off to the chief Rabbi of the city, Rabbi Yechezkel Landau,³⁷ known as the Noda B’Yehudah, and asked for his help. The Rabbi agreed to summon the businessman and question him, but immediately after the questioning began, the businessman again became enraged, and started shouting, “How could this be? I did this man a favor! He should thank me for what I did for him —now he’s turning around and accusing me of theft!” The Noda B’Yehudah was aware of the Talmudic passage which states that there are three ways through which one’s true character can be known: By the cup (how one acts when they have been drinking); the pocket (how one spends their money) and by anger (how they react to adversity and confrontation).³⁸

³⁵ The story concludes parenthetically: The question as to who among the actor’s in Solomon’s story was the most praiseworthy is purposefully left unanswered, as among (1) the faithful and honest woman; (2) The generous and accommodating husband; (3) The understanding and undemanding suitor; or (4) The robber who had a change of heart.

³⁶ https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/5115198/jewish/The-Money-in-the-Barrel.htm

³⁷ 1713-1793.

³⁸ See *Eruvin*, 65a.

Realizing that the businessman's quickness to anger revealed strong feelings of guilt, he advised: "If it was not you who took the money and resealed the barrel, then it must have been one of your non-Jewish workers. If a gentile touches unsealed wine, the wine is no longer kosher. Since we do not know which barrel it was, I must reluctantly rule that all of your wine is non-kosher, and may not be sold to Jews."

Appreciating now that he stood to lose many more times than the sum he had stolen, the merchant admitted his guilt. "It wasn't the gentiles!" he cried. "I myself have taken the money from this man. It is I who am guilty." The Rabbi instructed him to return the money and beg the young man for forgiveness. He also told him how to do *teshuvah*³⁹ for what he had done. From then on, the merchant became a righteous man.⁴⁰ Rabbi Baron closes the tale with the invitation that observant Jews ask themselves: Does it ever happen that after we help someone, we are tempted to be dishonest with that person, "justified" by the fact that this person "owes us"? Does it happen that we are dishonest once, and it leads to even greater dishonesty which gets us into further trouble? How would we help a person realize that they must do *teshuvah*?⁴¹

This exploration of Rabbinical interpretation of Jewish folklore ends with *The Apple Tree's Discovery*, curated by Professor Peninnah Schram and Rabbi Rachayl Eckstein Davis,⁴² a charming children's tale of a great oak forest in which there was a little apple tree, standing alone among the great trees:

One night the little apple tree looked up at the sky and saw a wonderful sight. The stars in the sky appeared to be hanging on the branches of the oak trees. "Oh God, oh God," whispered the little apple tree. How lucky those oak trees are to have such beautiful stars hanging on their branches. I want more than anything in the world to have stars on my branches, just like the oak trees. Then I would feel truly special."

God looked down at the apple tree and said gently. "Have patience, little apple tree." Time passed. The snows melted and spring came to the land. Tiny pink and white apple blossoms appeared on the branches of the apple tree. Birds came to rest on its branches. People walked by and admired the beautiful blossoms. The apple tree continued to grow all summer long. The branches filled with leaves and blossoms, forming a canopy overhead.

Night after night, the little tree looked up at the millions and millions of stars in the sky and cried out, "Oh God, I want more than *anything* to have stars in my tree, on my branches and on my leaves – just like those oak trees."

God looked down and said, "You already have gifts. Isn't it enough to have shade to offer people and fragrant blossoms, and branches for birds to rest upon so they can sing you their songs?" The apple tree answered simply, "Dear God, I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but that is not special enough. I do appreciate how much pleasure I give to others, but I what want more than anything in the world is to have *stars*, not blossoms on my branches. Then I would feel truly special." God smiled and said, "Be patient, little apple tree."

The seasons changed again. Soon the apple tree was filled with beautiful apples. People, walking in the forest, reached up and picked apples to eat. Still, when night fell on the forest, the apple tree looked at the stars in the oak trees and called out, "Oh God, I want more than *anything* in the world to have stars on my branches. Then I would feel truly special." God asked, "Isn't it enough that you now have wonderful apples to offer. Doesn't that satisfy you. Doesn't that give you enough pleasure and make you feel special?"

Without saying a word, the apple tree answered by shaking its branches from side to side. God caused a hard wind to blow. The great oak trees began to sway and the apple tree began to shake. An apple fell from the top branch and split open when it hit the ground.

"Look," commanded God. "Look inside yourself. What do you see." The Little Apple Tree looked down and saw that right in the center of the apple – was a star. The Little Apple Tree exclaimed, "A star. I have a star!" God laughed a gentle laugh and added, "So you do have stars on your branches. They've been there all along. You just didn't know it."

⁴⁰ *Sefer Hamasiyot*, p. 171, from Maimonides' classic work detailing the 613 biblical commandments.

²⁶ Literally "return," repentance, return to a Jew's true essence.

⁴² Peninnah Schram and Rachayl Eckstein Davis © 2004.

Professor Schram and Rabbi Davis add this teaching epilogue: “We usually cut an apple by holding it up with the stem up. In order to find the star, turn it on its side. If we change direction in life we can find the spark that ignites the star in each of us. Look carefully and you’ll find that beautiful star.”

Conclusion

For ancient Jews words were more than a sound. They had life in the effect they provoked in the audience, including moral instruction as to what Jews ought do and what they ought forgo doing. In Hebraic folklore, at once told in the vernacular while creating it, Jews find grist for their faith in stories, myth, folklore and fable, from pedestrian to fantastic. The broad moral themes in many of the Rabbis’ stories are often presented as almost pointillistic portrayals of Jewish daily lives, ancient and contemporary alike.

The stories reflect an understanding that the believing adherents’ experiences have always had the same moral fragilities, lusts, and jealousies, but also inherent individual moralities that through the mediation of ancient and now modern Rabbis as glossators convey collectively a splendid intelligence in how to lead a moral and spiritual life. In this selection of folk stories from within the TALMUD and other folkloric traditions, we see that the title Teacher, or Rabbi, only begins to describe the role they play in bringing the faithful into a meaningful understanding of the TORAH and the TALMUD and thereby closer the New Jerusalem.

Franz Fanon put the quest well when he prayed: “Make me a man who questions.”⁴³ At once contextual and conceptual, ancient and modern Rabbinical interpretation of Hebrew folklore instructs beyond the precincts of the believing communities of the fraternal Abrahamic faiths and share from a purse of wisdom that never empties. Formidably erudite and if anything understated, Rabbis of antiquity and modern times alike convince by counsel and good example in bringing closer the New Jerusalem.

⁴³ From FRANZ FANON, *BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS* (Pluto Press, London 1986).