

HOW TO WRITE SUCCESSFUL JEWISH STORIES

By Tzvi Fishman

INTRODUCTION

CREATIVE JEWISH WRITING

BACKGROUND

This book is first and foremost a guide to storytelling and dramatic writing. It is the product of the myriad of novels that I have read, the scores of stage plays that I have seen, and the thousands of movies that I watched before becoming a baal t'shuva. It is also a product of university courses in creative writing and my studies in the New York University School of the Arts, including techniques that I learned under the tutelage of many fine instructors, among whom Professors Haig Manoogian, George Stoney, Jackie Park, and George Baudin stand out. Also incorporated into the following chapters are the things I learned from my students during the years that I taught dramatic and creative writing at New York University School of Film and Television, and at the Maale Film School in Jerusalem. Finally, and certainly the major source for what follows is my own personal experience, the hours and hours and hours of writing and rewriting, filling up wastebaskets with crumpled balls of discarded chapters and scenes until the story line flowed with dramatic action and suspense.

INSECT FREE SALAD

Since my novels and short stories have found a wide readership in the religious community in Israel, I am periodically asked to speak to students about creative writing. Unfortunately, a great many of our youth do not know what Jewish literature or creativity are all about.

A few years ago, I accepted an invitation to speak at a very respected ulpana. Rows and rows of young teenagers, not much older than my daughter, sat facing me, eager to hear stories about my journey from Hollywood to the

Holy Land. I began the talk by asking what novel they were presently reading in their literature class.

One of the girls answered, “*The Slave*.”

“*The Slave*?” I stuttered.

An archive of old movies and novels flashed through my brain, like an editing machine switched into fast reverse, until the sordid story of “*The Slave*” came into focus.

Could it really be that these innocent, pure daughters of Israel were reading a tale so filled with immodesty that it caused me, a former Hollywood screenwriter, to blush just thinking about it?

True, the book’s author, Issac Beshivas Singer, knew how to put words together with the skill of a symphonic composer, but “*The Slave*” bordered on cultured promiscuity. The whole book centers around the lusts and guilty passion of a Jewish peasant for a forbidden gentile temptress.

“*The Slave*?” I exclaimed. You mean to say you read erotic novels in literature class?”

I noticed that the teachers who were sitting at the side of the hall appeared to be somewhat nervous. After all, there was no telling what a baal t’shuva (lit. master of penitence – someone who has become religiously observant) from Hollywood might say.

“What’s the matter with *The Slave*?” one of the girls called out. “So what if some passages aren’t very modest? There are a lot of important messages in the book.”

I paused. The truth is, I wasn’t prepared for a debate on the merits of Singer’s writings. It was at least twenty years since I had read the book, and my memories of it were extremely vague.

“Let me give an example,” I said. “In a salad, there are many nice things. Ripe tomatoes, fresh lettuce, crisp green peppers, tasty olives. But if there were a few insects in it, would you eat it?”

“It isn’t the same at all,” the girl protested.

“Why not?” I asked. “A Jew has to guard, not only what he puts in his mouth, he has to guard what he puts in his brain. If you read about immodest matters, you are going to think about immodest matters. It is as simple as that.”

For the next hour, I tried to get across to these young students that there was a difference between true Jewish writing and stories like “*The Slave*” that just happen to be about Jews.

CREATIVE JEWISH WRITING

For someone who writes, the question becomes how does one go about creating a true Jewish literature? Or a true Jewish cinema?

The answer can be found in the writings of Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Hakohen Kook. In a letter to the newly-founded Bezalel Academy of the Arts in Jerusalem, Rabbi Kook praised the school for its important contribution to the nation’s revival. Nonetheless, Rabbi Kook warned that great care should be taken to keep art within the clearly defined borders of Jewish law. “Our nation has always related in a positive and pleasant way to the artistic beauty manifest in man’s creative works, but this must also be limited. Even in the more exalted and loftier matters, we are cautious of drunkenness and excessiveness” (*Igrot HaRiyah*, 158).

Similarly, in his introduction to *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs) Rabbi Kook explains the importance of literature to the development of the Israelite nation. “Literature stands waiting to express all of the yearnings which are hidden in the depth of the humanity’s psyche. As long as one thread of man’s inner being is still hidden and lacking expression, it is the duty of art to reveal it” (*Olat HaRiyah*, Part 2, Pg. 3).

Literature’s task is to explore the depths of the human psyche and provide the vehicle to bring man’s innermost being to expression. If this is so, then the girl from the ulpana rightfully claimed that “*The Slave*” serves the important function of bringing man’s inner desires and conflicts to light. But Rabbi Kook goes on to teach that not every stirring of the soul is fit to parade in the open, even when done under the banner of “literature.”

“However, those hidden matters through which mankind is bettered, not by expressing them, but by burying them, a spade has been provided to dig them a hole and cover them up. And woe to the person who uses his tool to do the opposite, to uncover the refuse and stink of mankind,” (Ibid).

Rabbi Kook takes his metaphor of the spade from the Torah’s injunctions regarding Israel’s soldiers: “*And thou shall have a spade among thy weapons, and it shall be when thou shall ease thyself outside, thou shall dig with it, and shall turn back and cover up thy excrement; for the L-rd thy G-d walks in the midst of thy camp, to deliver thee, and to give up thy enemies before thee; therefore thy camp shall be holy, that He see no unclean thing in thee and turn away from thee*” (Devarim, 23:14).

Just as Israelite soldiers must keep their camp holy, so too writers and filmmakers must use their creativity to uplift the world and not to pollute it. Certain subjects are better left buried. Immodest matters, when detailed in a graphic manner, even if dressed up in beautiful and seemingly cultured costumes, should be buried like excrement in the ground.

Does this mean that writers are forbidden to write about love? Not at all. But in doing so, writers must exert great self-control and caution. Rabbi Kook writes: “Stirrings of the soul founded on feelings of natural love, which play a large part in life, these are suitable to describe in literature, in all aspects which reveal their inner workings, but only by guarding against the tendency toward drunkenness inherent in these feelings, which transform them from their natural purity into sordid pollution” (*Olat HaRiyah*, Vol. 2, pg. 3).

Everything depends on the subject you chose and the manner in which you tell it. Detailing every glance, touch, and physical yearning, the way Singer does in “*The Slave*,” fires the imagination and evil inclination, something forbidden by Jewish Law, (*Shulchan Aruch, Laws of Shabbat*, 307:16).

The writer is not to use his pen (spade in Rabbi Kook’s metaphor) to uncover man’s unbridled passions - matters that are better kept out of the mind of Jewish readers. The love between a man and a woman is a fitting subject for literature, but such intimate matters should not be portrayed with the same moment by moment excitement as a sportscaster broadcasting a basketball game over the radio.

While literature must have its fences like anything else, no one is coming to ban it. In his classic, "*Orot*," Rabbi Kook emphasizes the vital role of literature in bringing redemption to the world. "Literature will be sanctified, and writers will also sanctify themselves, and the world will rise up and recognize the great and gentle power of literature that will raise up the spiritual foundation of the world in all of its exaltation" (*Orot*, "*Orot HaTechiyah*, 37).

Most people are motivated by their feelings, which influence their thinking and beliefs. It is here, in the deep workings of the psyche that literature can illuminate and uplift the spiritual foundation of mankind, transforming darkness to light.

"The spirit of impurity will disappear from the world, and writing will be sanctified. Every writer will begin to recognize the exaltedness and holiness in his work, and will not take hold of his pen without initial meditations of profound t'shuva (penitence) preceding each creative effort. Then the creation will emerge in pure form and expression, the Divine spirit will rest on it, and the soul of the entire Nation will be graced by it (*Orot*, "*Orot HaTchiya*, 37).

For Israel to return to its true Torah culture, all writers, not only writers from Hollywood, must become baale t'shuva. As Rabbi Kook writes:

"Out of the worldly, too, will emerge the holy, and out of the brazen liberalism will also emerge the beloved yoke of the Torah. Golden chains will be woven and will arise out of the poetry of free thinkers, and a luminous penitence will also arise from the secular literature. This will be the great wonder of the vision of Redemption ("*Orot HaT'shuva*," 17:3).

"Feelings of t'shuva, in all of their splendor, with all their deepest inner vibrations, must find expression in literature so that the generation of the Redemption will understand, in the fathoms of its being, the importance of penitence as a living and vital force, and thus, the generation will return and be healed," (*Orot HaT'shuva*, 17:5).

The Jewish writer has two aspects. One is the universal aspect that Jews share with mankind in general. The other is the particular Divine connection that is unique to Am Yisrael. Rabbi Kook teaches that a Jewish writer can only truly be called a sofer (scribe) after he first purifies his personal deeds

and aspirations by putting them in line with G-d's will for the world as set down in the Torah. Only when a writer returns to his true Jewish sources will his writing be truly Jewish. Similar to a sofer stam (a Torah scribe), a Jewish writer must first immerse himself in the purifying mikvah of t'shuva before wielding his pen.

WRITING MUST BE LEARNED

In my eight years of teaching creative writing, both in the United States and Israel, perhaps three or four students were what might be called natural writers. In the same way that there are "born artists," there are "born writers" as well. You either have the gift of creative writing or you don't. You can teach someone how to develop his imagination and creative skills; you can teach the techniques of good writing, but if a person doesn't have a "feel" for it, his writings will lack the magnetic power contained in great works of literature and cinematic art. You can lecture until you are blue in the face; you can have the student write and write and write - the fact is, most people are simply not writers.

Nonetheless, by the end of a course in writing, or, G-d willing, after studying this book, twenty out of thirty students will end up writing credible and interesting stories. Even if he or she doesn't become a professional writer, the student will have discovered several talents that he or she previously never developed.

On the other hand, a naturally creative person who lacks the tools to bring his vision to the world will waste his great gift. A great artist must also be a master of the technical side of his craft.

Today's media is like an insatiable monster. It demands new material constantly, twenty-four hours around the clock. Not every writer or screenwriter is a creative genius. Nor does he or she have to be. To feed the beast of the media, you need people who have learned the craft, and this is something that can be mastered through study and practice. This is also true in the world of literature and cinema. Since the script is the basis of a film, if the script writing is poor, the film will be lousy too. Certainly, when it comes to writing for the movies and television, there is still much to be learned.

When it comes to Jewish Creative Writing, you can learn the techniques of writing a short story or a script for a film. You can learn about the five acts of a drama and about building suspense. But if you want your work to have a true Jewish soul, then you have to have an attachment to Torah. While there may be a great many writers who are Jewish, there are far fewer great Jewish writers.

Thus the purpose of this guidebook to creative writing is twofold. First, to teach the essential elements of dramatic writing, and second, by using examples from the Torah and other Jewish sources, to immerse the beginning Jewish writer in the purifying mikvah of our own holy, creative Jewish springs. It is my hope and prayer that after studying this book, the reader will be better equipped to express his thoughts and ideas in a way that will inspire the Jewish People to a deeper love and connection to Eretz Yisrael, to Torah, and to the Writer of Writers, the Creator of Creators, the Holy One Blessed Be He.

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Chapter One

TYPES OF STORIES

A WORD OF WARNING

Like all writing, Jewish writing comes in all shapes and sizes. In stories with serious themes, a Jewish writer should strive to inspire and uplift the reader, raising him to a deeper understanding and perception of life, as set forth in the Torah. In writing comedy, a Jewish writer should try to make the reader happy, for as Rabbi Nachman teaches, “It is a great mitzvah to be always happy.” But the comedy should be of a wholesome nature, and not fall to the level of stupidity for the sake of stupidity, or to a joking frivolity (latzanut) that borders on sin. As Rabbi Kook writes, the task of a Jewish writer is to perfume the world with his writing, and not to pollute it. Just as a person hangs up his clean clothes outside to dry, and not his dirty laundry, subjects dealing in an explicit nature with man’s baser passions are better left hidden from view.

Certainly sex, and violence for the sake of violence, must be avoided. Thieves shouldn’t be glorified like they often are in the movies. Murderers shouldn’t be portrayed in a sympathetic light. In one best-selling novel, a famous Jewish-American writer wrote disparagingly about his mother, ridiculing her in a way that made her look like a monster. While the book earned him lots of money, it certainly won’t earn him the World to Come. Another celebrated Jewish novelist from American wrote a satirical, heretical novel about King David. Without a doubt, he will have some serious explaining to do to King David when they meet up in the world of truth.

“I didn’t mean it,” the writer will insist.

“I was only kidding,” the writer will stutter as King David lifts his gleaming sword.

“Hey, wait a minute,” the writer will plead. “I’m a Jew. Family. Mishpucha. One of the chevre.”

The chevre kadisha, that is. Not only is his mockery of King David a regretful transgression, his cleverly written heresy can cause readers to believe in his literary poison.

As we mentioned in the introduction, just because something has a Jewish subject, or is written by a Jew, does not immediately classify it as an example of Jewish writing. King David himself had some good advice for writers when he said: “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the company of sinners, nor sits in the way of scorners.”

Don’t get me wrong. Certainly, there is a place for comedy and satire in Jewish literature or Jewish film. For instance, much of my writing is filled with humor (I hope). But cynicism spiced with ridicule (*latzinut*) for its own sake is a deadly brew. Instead of building, it destroys. Instead of illuminating, it darkens. If a Jew wants to make fun of religion, let him make fun of the idol worshippers, not the Torah. While there is nothing wrong with humor and laughing at ourselves, it is wise to leave our holy heroes alone. No matter how funny the joke; no matter how prestigious the prize; no matter how many books you can sell – don’t make fun of the Torah. It pays to remember that a Jewish writer should worry more about pleasing his Creator than he worries about pleasing his readers.

It goes without saying that *lashon hara* and *motzei shem rah* (tale bearing and forbidden speech) are also forbidden to write. Many novels start out with the disclaimer: “This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance that characters in this story may have to people in real life is purely coincidental.” If this is the case in secular books, where writers can find themselves faced with lawsuits, how much more careful a Jewish writer should be that he doesn’t write disparagingly about recognizable people, knowing that his book will be reviewed in the Court of All Courts. Historical figures can appear in works of historical fiction, but their portrayals should be painted with care.

With this introduction in mind, in this chapter, we will discuss some of the popular story genres. Though every avid reader is familiar with these

categories, listing them will hopefully help both beginning and overworked writers come up with new and refreshing story ideas.

DRAMATIC PLOTS

Dramatic plots are stories abounding with conflict. As we will learn in more depth in an upcoming chapter, conflict results from the struggle of characters over some goal. The conflict is designed to arouse the emotions of the reader, the theatergoer, or the audience watching a movie. Through a series of complications and crises, the emotions build and build to a climatic catharsis, reversal of situation, or revelation, which affirms the story's theme. The themes and problems that dramas deal with tend to be universal in scope. The stories of Joseph and his brothers; the Exodus, and the life of King David are all wonderful examples of true stories rich in drama.

MELODRAMAS

In a melodrama, the intensity of the drama is raised to an exaggerated level. Characters are often one-dimensional, possessing exaggerated traits. Action is bigger than life. The basic situation of the stories is sensational, not something based on everyday events. Many big, action-packed movies are melodramas. The scene in Megillat Esther when Achashverus discovers Haman fallen on Esther's couch is melodrama at its best. However, in writing a melodrama, great care must be taken not to overly strain the credibility of the story. While readers or viewers are willing to suspend their disbelief in order to go along for the roller coaster ride of the plot, the things that occur in the story must seem possible in the world that the writer has created.

TRAGEDY

Tragedy is a drama that ends with the downfall of the hero. A tragic ending inspires a feeling of pity and awe in the reader. The hero is defeated, not so much by the antagonist, but by a flaw in his own personality. For example, our Sages tell us that Samson's downfall was not brought about by the Philistines, but rather by his belief in his own holy prowess, in opposition to the admonishments of the Torah to be humble and not to stray after one's eyes, believing that one's spiritual greatness will guard him from sin.

As an outcome of the hero's downfall, the theme of a tragedy teaches a moral lesson. In Greek and Shakespearean tragedies, the hero dies in defeat. In Jewish tradition, however, the death of a hero does not necessarily mean his defeat, or his downfall. For example, Rabbi Akiva dies at the hands of the Roman oppressors, but his death is an unsurpassed victory of faith, and a great sanctification of G-d. His death comes about, not because of a flaw in his character, but rather because of his excellence. His devotion to G-d and to Torah are perfect. Although his death saddens us, we are inspired and spiritually elevated as well.

EPICS

Epics are sweeping dramatic tales dealing with the life of a period. Sometimes an epic will span several generations. Most often, epics are historical, and characters seem bigger than life. The life story of Rabbi Akiva contains all of the ingredients for an inspiring epic. Another material for an epic might be the saga of a Jewish family in medieval Spain, from the good years to the painful expulsion. Similarly, the struggles leading up to the State of Israel can provide rich background for many modern epics. Books of this sort demand a great deal of research in order to make the story seem real. And, as we will learn in the chapter called "Getting Started," the plot should be carefully outlined at the beginning, so that the writer won't get lost along the way.

COMEDY

The original meaning of a comedy was a story with a happy ending. Today, comedies are stories that are based on amusing situations and make people laugh. While the events and complications in a drama evoke a serious emotional response, the events and complications in a comedy are essentially funny, provoking laughter and smiles.

Comedies and dramas, however, share many of the same elements. Like in a drama, a good comedy has plot, conflict, and increasing suspense which builds to a climax. The laughter grows with each succeeding crisis, so that the climax, instead of being the most dramatic scene, is the funniest.

Bad comedies depend on gags, low-level dialogue, and wisecracks, rather than on amusing situations. Generally, comedy is based on the unexpected. For example, imagine a self-impressed businessman strutting down the street

on the way to a meeting. Suddenly, he slips on the peel of a banana and falls. This unexpected reversal evokes laughter. Or, if an elegantly dressed man reaches into his pocket to pay for a taxi and pulls out a melted chocolate bar instead, this unexpected surprise is humorous. Irony can also be funny, when the reader knows something that the character doesn't. For instance, if we know that a spider has crawled into the shoe of an unsuspecting lady, this can create humor. Or let's take the example of a popular movie about a husband and wife who get a divorce. When the court awards the mother custody of the children, and grants visiting privileges to the father only one time a month, the father becomes very depressed. To see his children, he dresses up as a woman and applies for a job as a nanny for the kids. Since the viewer knows more than the wife does, this makes for a funny movie.

Of course, if you are a Jewish writer, you may not want to write about a Torah prohibition and have your male hero dress up as a woman. This is a good example of the possible dilemmas a Jewish writer faces when he chooses a subject. While this funny situation could presumably be handled in good taste, many situations are not kosher at all. On one hand, you may sense that a satirical comedy about politics in Israel can be very popular, yet on the other hand, you know that latzinut and showing Eretz Yisrael in a negative light are not to be recommended. This is no easy test. Every writer wants to write a story that the reader will enjoy. Furthermore, a writer can reason, in order to influence the generation, it is important for writers to write about things that people can relate to, like the temptations and human failings which bring people to sin. So, in a situation like this, when a great idea possibly conflicts with a prohibition in the Torah, what should one do? If you don't know yourself and you want to be sure, ask a serious rabbi.

To appreciate the wisdom of our Sages, here is a personal example. Once, I wrote a screenplay about a youth who comes on aliyah and gets killed by a terrorist in the course of the story. Afraid that it might give viewers a negative impression of Eretz Yisrael, I went to Israel's Chief Rabbi Avraham Shapiro, of blessed memory, and asked if this could be considered "Debat HaAretz (speaking negatively about the Land of Israel) and thus discourage aliyah.

"The movie is for the non-Jews?" he asked with a tone of presumption.

"Well, yes and no," I answered. "Jews go to the movies too."

He thought for a moment then said, “I don’t know very much about movies, but I assume, if you don’t have the murder, you won’t have a movie.”

What wonderful insight! Another time, I was approached by a producer and asked to write an action adventure screenplay with lots of violence. This time, I asked Israel’s Chief Rabbi Mordechai Eliahu, of blessed memory, if I could do it, emphasizing that the only redeeming factor in the otherwise mindless story was that, in the end, good would win out over evil. He answered that I could write a story with violence if it was for a livelihood, but that I must be certain that there be absolutely no immodesty in the film.

JEWISH LAUGHTER

In the chapter on Drama, we will see that the Greeks claimed to have invented drama and tragedy, even though we beat them to it by a few thousand years. The Greeks took credit for having invented comedy as well. But here too, the Jewish people preceded them by a few thousand years. Probably, the most famous laugh in the Torah is Sarah’s.

“And Sarah laughed within herself, saying, “After I am grown old, shall I have this pleasure, my husband being old?” (*Bereshit*, 18:12).

The par between the promise of a child and Sarah’s advanced age caused her to laugh with a touch of self-derision. This, however, is not the first laugh in the Torah. At the end of the portion *Lech Lecha*, when G-d promises to give Avraham a child, Avraham laughs. This is where we learn the true essence of Jewish laughter.

“Then Avraham fell upon his face and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born to him who is a hundred years old?” (*Bereshit*, 17:17).

The commentator Onkelos explains that Avraham rejoiced with jubilation. His laughter expressed joy and pure faith. Even though Avraham’s son, Yitzhak, is generally associated with the fear of G-d and judgment, he received this chromosome of joyous faith from his father, as exemplified by his name, Yitzhak, which means, “He will laugh.” Throughout the generations, Jews have been able to laugh, even in their darkest hours. Rabbi Nachman teaches, “*Mitzvah gedolah l’hiyot b’simcha tamid*” – “It is a mitzvah to serve the L-rd in gladness. This joyous laughter is particularly connected to the rebuilding of Eretz Yisrael, as the verse of Tehillim attests:

“Then our mouths shall be filled with laughter” (Tehillim, 126:2). When we return to Eretz Yisrael, and to our true stature as a sovereign nation in our own Holy Land, then our laughter is characterized by complete joyous faith.

Along with this laughter of faith, we also inherited Sarah’s chromosome of self-mockery. This is the laughter that is associated with Jewish life and literature in the exile, popular in the classics of Yiddish literature and theater. It is a bittersweet laughter of self-derision, of the displaced, exiled Jew who is living in an alien and often hostile environment, stripped of Jewish independence and the true vitality of Torah - the laughter of a Jew who lives according to the whims of a foreign people. In a sense, it is a parody of true Jewish laughter.

This laughter of self-mockery became a shield for the Jew in galut (exile from the Land of Israel.) It shielded him not only from his painful situation of homelessness; it also shielded him from the feelings of self-hatred and shame, which he internalized from the gentiles around him. Thus throughout the exile, Jewish humor became characterized by self-mockery, which still characterizes the bestselling Jewish writers in America today, even though the Almighty has restored us to sovereignty in our own Land.

Now, with our return to our own nationhood in Israel, Jewish writers must strive to rediscover the humor of Avraham, the joyous laughter of faith, which brings hope, strength and Jewish pride to the future, rather than the mocking laughter of weakness and despair.

JEWISH STORIES

Jewish stories come in different shapes and sizes, from the Hasidic stories of the Baal Shem Tov, to the mystical stories of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, to the tales of Sholom Aleichem, and the rich character studies of Agnon. In all of these, we find a love and respect for Torah wisdom and Jewish tradition. Unfortunately, most modern Jewish American and Israeli writing has very little Jewish content at all. In fact, it is often anti-Jewish and anti-Torah. This, Rabbi Kook teaches, is a part of the chutzpah which heralds the footsteps of Mashiach (*Orot HaTechiya*, 39). But as Rabbi Kook assures us, out of these secular scribblers, a great literature of t’shuva is destined to spring, returning the Jewish People to G-d (*Orot HaT’shuva*, 17:3, and 17:5).

OTHER FAVORITE GENRES

As we mentioned, recalling the different story genres will often inspire a story idea. While none of these categories are particularly Jewish, aspects of them can be incorporated into a good Jewish yarn.

There are adventure stories, fantasies, mystery stories, sports stories, detective and horror stories, children's stories, and stories set in outer space. There are historical novels, political thrillers, family sagas, romantic novels, and novels of everyday life.

Most of these genres have a characteristic pattern that can be analyzed and copied. With a little imagination, a Jewish background and an uplifting Jewish theme can be added. Thus, these tried and tested formats can be “converted” and brought under the wings of the Shekinah of Am Yisrael. There are sparks of holiness in all things, even in *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*. Rabbi Kook explains in “*Orot*” that the blessing of Avraham is the ability to uplift all of the nations in the service of G-d (*Orot*, 1:3). When we return to Israel from the Diaspora, we return with a rich knowledge of literature and Hollywood filmmaking skills. We have already learned how to write award-winning screenplays, Pulitzer Prize winning plays, and best-selling novels. This is a part of the great wealth (*richus gadol*) that Avraham's offspring were promised when the time came to leave Egypt. Literature, filmmaking, and drama are among the tools we are to use to bring the word of G-d to the world. But first, a writer has to learn the skills of the craft.

Chapter Two

STORY IDEAS

If a person doesn't know what to write about, then he or she probably isn't a writer. But some people simply have trouble getting started. So the following is a list of places where can look for story ideas to get the creative juices flowing.

TANACH

One obvious place to find ideas for Jewish stories is the Tanach. This is especially true when one wants to write stories for young people. The lives of our Forefathers can provide the background for many inspiring tales. Of course, one has to be careful not to distort the basic truths of the narrative. Furthermore, the heroes of the Bible must be treated with the uppermost respect. Woe to writers who parody the stories of the Torah and turn Kings David and Shlomo into characters of ridicule and derision. While humor is an important element in any good story, the writer must use it in order to build character, not to destroy it.

A wealth of story material can be found in the Talmud and Midrash. While the stories of Rabbi Akiva and Judah the Maccabee are well-known legends, they can be retold in new and exciting ways. The lives of great Torah scholars and tzaddikim throughout the generations are filled with adventure and meaning. These classic legends not only make good bedtime stories, they can be developed into full-length plays, films, and literary dramas. The writer first has to do some scholarly homework, reading as much on the subject as possible. If you want your story to be convincing, the first rule is, you have to know what you are writing about.

JEWISH HISTORY

Another excellent place for story ideas is history. The history of the Jewish People is a treasure chest of dramatic sagas, situations, characters and themes. Study up on any period, whether it be the Inquisition, the Holocaust, or the founding of the State of Israel, and you will discover dozens of powerful story ideas. Every Diaspora had its unique struggles, intrigues, heroes, and tragedies. The wandering Jew is in itself a wonderful metaphor for the plight of the soul in this world.

Unfortunately, most Jewish writers who write about the exiled Jew, leave him there, as if living amongst the gentiles was the Jew's natural place. For example, modern Jewish American writers forgot Jerusalem, and America became the new Jewish dream. Talented Jewish writers wrote beautifully written stories which justified assimilation and their own betrayals of Judaism. Rav Kook writes in "*Orot*" that in galut, the Jew's creative faculty is polluted with foreign ideas. So, while writing about history and the exile is fine, the true Israeli writer should remember that the final stop on the journey of Jewish history is Jerusalem, not New York.

One other note of warning – since historical plots are often sweeping in their breadth, it is often wise to focus on a specific character or event, so that the material can be handled in a unified and focused manner.

The choice of which historical character you write about, and which particular historical incident you chose, depends on what you are trying to say. For instance, if one's theme is the indestructible Jewish spirit, then one might chose a tale of bravery from the Holocaust, or a historical character like Zev Jabotinsky, who fought against assimilation, and not someone like the German philosopher Spinoza who succumbed to it.

NEWSPAPERS

Many unusual and interesting happenings can be found in newspapers. With imagination, these true-life events can be developed into compelling stories. Of course, the writer must alter names and places to disguise the identities of actual people. Also, since the media most often reports on sensational news items, often involving base and criminal acts, the writer must decide if he or she wants to add to the immorality and violence in the world by elaborating on these stories. By dwelling on themes involving immorality and violence, even though the bad guy in the story ends up in jail, the writer is dragging his reader through a literary junkyard. Once, when I asked a rabbi if I could write a detective story involving a murder, he answered, "There is enough murder and violence in the world – why add to it?"

TRUE INCIDENTS

Life is filled with great ideas for stories. Many wonderful books are based on things that happened just down the street. Nonetheless, just because

something actually happened doesn't mean that it has to be made into a movie or book. Not every true-life incident contains the necessary drama to build a story around it. Beginning writers often think that because something really happened, then it must be the stuff of great drama. The truth is that life is life. Drama is different. Drama is something artificial that must be created to make an effective story. Certainly, if a writer has great skill, he can create a compelling story that relies on mood, style, description, or feeling, rather than on bold dramatic action. This, however, is generally true in short stories, which can be read in a single sitting. For longer stories, novels, and films, the dramatic moments of life usually have to be intensified to sustain reader interest. The methods of structuring a dramatic plot of this fashion will be discussed in upcoming chapters.

Another word of caution. Though an incident may actually have happened in somebody's life, that doesn't mean it will seem plausible in a story. A story has rules of its own. Actions must be motivated. Happenings cannot simply occur. Even though in real life a telephone pole may have fallen on a burglar's head just as he was about to steal the purse of a little old lady, in a story it won't work. The reader won't believe it. Happenings must evolve from the story itself, rather than fall from the sky.

STORIES BASED ON CHARACTERS

Stories can also start from characters. Historical characters are a classic example. Great achievers and heroes in all walks of life are sources for dramatic material. Interesting people make for interesting stories, whether it be a simple shepherd like Rabbi Akiva who begins to learn the aleph bet at age forty, or the story of a Jewish baby who grows up in the house of the Pharaoh.

A character who is a little different, with a unique way of viewing the world, can also provide the foundation for a good story. For instance, when you have a character as interesting and rich in personality as Tevye the Milkman, and when you write as well as Sholom Aleichem, then most of your work is done. If you have an interesting hero, and give him, or her, an interesting goal, then you have yourself a story. Throw in a few conflicts, complications, and crises, and the reader will be breathless as he races to finish each page.

The character of Tevye the Milkman was the inspiration behind my novel, "Tevye in the Promised Land" and its sequels, "Arise and Shine!" and "The Lion's Roar." Ever since seeing the movie, "Fiddler on the Roof," in my youth, I fell in love with the character. After I made Aliyah to Israel, it hurt me to think that Tevye was still in galut, so I decided to write a novel and bring him to Eretz Yisrael as a pioneer of the Lsnd. My theme was to show that being home for a Jew meant living in the Holy Land, and that even though a man cannot always understand the mysterious ways of the Almighty, everything was for the best. Having my character and theme, I had only to put some obstacles in his way to build to exciting story. With snowstorms, ocean voyages, secular suitors pursuing his daughters, nasty Turkish officials, marauding Arabs, epidemics of malaria, locusts, and the saga of modern Zionist history for a canvas, I had enough material to write a whole series of novels.

IMAGINATION

People with good imaginations can think up stories themselves. In many cases, these people are "born" storytellers. Nevertheless, imagination is a skill which can be developed, like anything else. To do this, you may have to sit in a secluded park and leave the cell phone at home. Just as dreams pass through the mind during sleep, story ideas float by in one's imagination if your antenna is raised and tuned in to receive them.

Like with everything else, prayer always helps. If you are stuck, try praying for a good idea. if you want to. G-d leads a person along the path he wants to follow. If you know what it is that you would like to communicate, it isn't a big problem for G-d to send a story idea your way. Remember, the Holy One Blessed Be He is the greatest storyteller of them all.

Chapter Theme

THEME

THE STORY'S MESSAGE

One of the most important elements of any story is the theme. The theme is the central idea underlying the story, or the message which the story conveys. The story's plot, from beginning to end, should illustrate and prove the theme which the writer wishes to communicate to the reader.

While the action and plot form the body of the story, the theme is its soul. For example, the plot of the Exodus follows Moshe Rabenu as he confronts Pharaoh, orchestrates the ten plagues, and leads the Jews out of Egypt. The theme of the story is the message that this story portrays. A great story like the Exodus can have many great themes – the supremacy of Hashem in the world; the Divine Election of Israel; the triumph of good over evil, to cite but a few.

In the story of Yosef and his brothers, the plot follows Yosef as he rises to greatness in Egypt after being sold by his brothers. To survive the famine in Canaan, the brothers descend to Egypt, where through the twists and turns of the plot, Yaacov's family is reunited. Among the many messages in this multi-faceted story is the central theme of Hashem's Providence over the events in this world.

Very often, in writing a story, the writer will begin with a theme. In order to communicate the theme to the reader, the writer will then have to create a suitable plot to express his or her message. In the examples cited above, one can say that Hashem wanted to teach the world about His Providence, so, like the writer or director of a play, He arranged events on earth to unfold in such a way that Yosef becomes the most powerful man in Egypt. Wanting to teach the world that there was a difference between the Jews and the gentiles, Hashem created the scene-by-scene script of the Exodus, not only on the parchments of the Torah, but in actual reality, as Moshe and the Jewish people undertake the greatest real-life production ever enacted.

The point is that a writer often begins the writing process with something that he or she wants to say. This is the story's theme. Then the challenge

becomes finding the right story to express it. One further note - since theme is the message deduced from the dramatic outcome of the story, the theme must lend itself to dramatization and not be some vague abstraction.

In order to more clearly understand how a theme can be the starting point for a story, let's take a look at a short story that I wrote, which appears in my collection of stories, "Days of Mashiach." The story can be called a story of theme, because for some time I had searched for a vehicle that would illustrate the very first sentence of Rabbi Kook's book, "*Orot*." Rabbi Kook begins: "The Land of Israel is not an external matter." I wanted to express this idea in story form. Around that time, I attended a Torah lecture by Rabbi David Samson. To describe the connection between the Jewish People and Eretz Yisrael, he used a metaphor of a husband and wife. Just as a husband and wife are one, the Jewish People and Eretz Yisrael are one. And just as any normal husband would not give away his beloved wife to another man, so too the Jewish People are eternally bonded to their Land and should never surrender it to any other nation. The metaphor of the husband and wife was exactly what I was looking for. So I dressed it up with all the elements of a story, and the result is "Ehud" which you can find at the end of this guidebook.

Having a theme that I wanted to express, I then had to find the right story to express it. I decided to make my tale a tragedy by telling it through the eyes of a character who is so confused by foreign ideas and beliefs that he finally self-destructs. First he gives away his money, then his family's television, then his clothes, then his house, until he is faced with the test of defending or surrendering his very own wife. I wanted the story to have the style and flavor a children's fable, so I kept the writing as simple as possible. In order to build suspense, I started with a small conflict and gradually worked out the very simple plot by introducing increasing complications that build to a climax.

We will learn more about creating effective drama in an upcoming chapter. What is important to understand here is that your theme is the unifying element in the story. It is the spine of the story, preventing needless digression. Everything that occurs in the story must be connected to the theme. Be careful that the story begins and ends with the same theme. In this way, the climax of the story will illustrate the theme with which the writer began, and not some other theme he adopted along the way. For example, let's say that a writer wants to express the message that true happiness

comes from getting closer to G-d. To do this, he creates the story of a baal t'shuva, who makes a journey from darkness to light. To stay true to his original message, it makes more sense to end the story with the happiness that the hero has discovered as a result of his journey, and not on the pain of his parents who are unable to break free from the compromises they made in their own lives vis-à-vis their connection to Judaism.

A talented writer is able to subtly weave the theme into his story. He doesn't hit the reader over the head with a hammer, shouting out his theme in every chapter. Nor does he have his characters discussing the theme out loud. Rather, the practiced writer camouflages the theme in the story and allows the action of the plot to lead the reader to the desired intellectual conclusions. Good creative writing isn't a lecture. First and foremost, a story should be interesting, intriguing, entertaining, and intellectually exciting. Whether dramatic or humorous, a story should pull the reader along. If a writer can do this, and also express a worthwhile message, then he or she has succeeded in creating a powerful story.

JEWISH THEMES

True Jewish writing should have true Jewish themes. For example, in America, many famous Jewish writers have written stories with themes that advocate assimilation. In dozens of bestselling novels, Jewish tradition is scorned and the hero finds liberation from the "shackles" of Judaism by marrying the forbidden "shiksha." Needless to say, this is not creative Jewish writing. These are works of destruction. The fact that stories like these are written by Jews about Jews, does not make them examples of Jewish art. The opposite is the case – they stem from the sitra achra (foreign spiritual forces; lit. "the other side"). Freedom of speech and expression is a noble concept, but for a Jewish writer, writing a story filled with apikorsut (heresy) is a gigantic faux pas. A Jewish writer who writes against the Jewish religion or against Eretz Yisrael may know how to string words together; he may win many prizes; but he is not a Jewish writer. He is a destroyer of Israel, not a creator, or builder.

Jewish themes can be universal in nature, such as the supreme value of kindness, brotherhood, and the triumph of good over evil. Or they can be more specifically Jewish, dealing with concepts of Torah, t'shuva, and the Redemption of Am Yisrael. One word of caution. After nearly two-thousand years of exile amongst the gentile nations, our concepts of Judaism have

been tragically distorted. Many Christian and Western notions have found their way into our thinking. For instance, indoctrinated by the books and movies and values of Western culture, many people believe that success is being rich, or famous, or honored. In Judaism, however, true success is getting closer to G-d. The Mishna teaches that being rich is being content with one's lot. For a Jew, a life devoted to Torah and t'shuva is the greatest success. Even if a person doesn't can never attain the goal of perfection, the fact that he or she is trying to live a holier life is success in itself. So before choosing a theme, try to be sure that it is truly in line with Torah and the teachings of our Sages.

On the more technical side, in choosing a theme, the writer should strive for clarity. The theme should be understandable, rather than theoretical and obtuse. The writer's goal should be to communicate, not to confuse. Therefore, you should be able to state your theme in a simple, straightforward sentence. For instance, in a story about King David, a theme sentence might be, "Life is filled with trials, but the righteous win out in the end."

Writing too is filled with trials, but the writer who sticks to his theme will succeed in creating a story that will stay in the reader's mind long after the final page has been read.

Chapter Four

CHARACTER

CHARACTERIZATION

In the discussion of story ideas, we mentioned that an interesting character can form the basis of a good story. For example, a story about Shimshon, Rabbi Akiva, or the Baal Shem Tov is bound to be interesting because of the strength, depth, and uniqueness of their personalities. If the writer knows the personality of the character, he will know how the character will react in any given situation. Thus, once you have your hero worked out on paper, an interesting story can be easily constructed by placing him or her in a succession of situations that lead to a climax and unifying theme. To make sure this works, your main characters should have strong goals. By confronting the character with a variety of challenging situations that stand in the way of achieving his or her goal, a compelling storyline can be developed.

To create a truly convincing character, a writer must first know himself. The human personality is a complex web of diverse factors including heredity, upbringing, cultural indoctrination, education, and a person's connection with G-d. Only by understanding the various influences affecting his own psyche, behavior, and beliefs, will a writer be able to build believable characters.

Unless one is writing a fantasy, characters should seem true to life. They should act in accordance with their personalities and not change colors to fit the demands of the plot. If the hero suddenly acts out of character, the cause must be plausible and clear to the reader. For example, during his exile in Philistine territory, King David acted insane. Though his behavior was out of character, it is clear to us that he acting this way to save his life from the threat that he faced from the many enemies around him.

Because the human personality is extremely complex, a writer must highlight the character's most dominant traits, at the expense of others. Nevertheless, characters should not be stereotyped or one-sided, but well rounded and true to life.

In order for a reader to believe in the hero, his personality must be credible and sympathetic. This enables the reader to identify with the character. Identification is the key to arousing the reader's emotions. By identifying with the character, the reader will vicariously experience the character's struggle. He will share the character's hopes and his fears. In this way, when the character is brought to a catharsis or dramatic revelation, through a climax in the story, the reader will experience it too. By skillfully using this device, the writer can penetrate the heart and soul of the reader, or viewer, and bring him to discover personal insights and universal truths.

BUILDING A CHARACTER

The thoughts, speech, and actions of the character tell who he is. In a movie, a character must be revealed through what he does. In a stage play, dialogue plays the most important role. Thoughts, like in the famous soliloquies of Hamlet, can be expressed, but they must be handled with great literary skill in order to be effective. In a novel, action, speech and thought combine to portray the character. However it is always best to reveal inner traits through what the character does, and not by his thoughts or the things that he says.

The external world of the character also tells the reader or viewer many things about him. The clothes he or she wears, the type of house he lives in, the car he drives, the kind of work he does, all of these things go into the canvas the writer must paint. Obviously, a man who drives an expensive Mercedes is different from a man who makes do with a second-hand Toyota. Similarly, someone who wears bright red clothing is advertising himself to the world differently than a person who wears black.

Though stories have heroes and villains, no one is perfect, and no one is all bad. Both strengths and weaknesses must be portrayed to create a believable character. The heroes of the Torah were paragons of virtue, but they also had shortcomings and flaws. Nonetheless, because of their great holy stature, their characters shouldn't be reduced to our understanding of personality, nor should they be judged in the light of our lesser, modern-day standards.

While a character should be consistent in his actions and his beliefs, there is room for character growth and change throughout the course of a story. But any change must be motivated by the events in the story. Often, the strongest dramatic moments come about through character growth and discovery. The moment when the brothers recognize Joseph changes them for the better.

The revelation creates a catharsis, which is the Greek term for an emotional release. When the drama is handled skillfully, this profound emotional awakening occurs both in the characters and in the reader or viewer as well. In the case of Yosef and his brothers, the unexpected revelation awakens deep feelings of t'shuva, bringing about the personal growth and reconciliation needed to reunite the family and establish the foundation of Am Yisrael.

The main action of a story, its development and plot, should be carried out by the main characters. Sometimes an inexperienced writer will introduce a character only once in the story, just to bring about some crisis or salvation needed for the plot. It is best to avoid coincidental characters like these and let the main characters create the drama of the story with all of its twists and turns. If during the writing, you run into a situation where you are stuck in the middle of the plot, unable to take the story in the direction you want to go because it runs against the truth of the characters you have created, then it is best to stop. Take the time to think again, rework your plot, use your eraser, and even start over, rather than to force the plot to move in a direction that is not true to your characters.

Every character in the story must have a definite, logical reason for being there. Minor characters often are used to provide contrast to the main characters. Others provide comic relief that is helpful in lightening serious, emotionally cumbersome plots. A side character can also be used as a confidant and friend, allowing the main character to reveal his thoughts, aspirations, and fears.

Introducing your characters in a novel way, or in some out of the ordinary situation, makes a strong impression in the reader's imagination. Moshe Rabenu is a classic example. Not every baby is hidden away from an enemy, then set out to sea in a basket. Hashem could have started the story with Moshe already grown, just as the stories of the Book of Judges begin, but Moshe's unusual childhood makes for more riveting reading. The "World's Greatest Storyteller" worked out the true historical events in the life of the Moshe and the Jewish People to create the greatest story ever told. Having little Moshe, the future savior of Israel, grow up in the palace of the Pharaoh is an example of dramatic irony at its best. "What's going to happen?" the reader keeps wanting to know.

Naturally, characters should be as interesting and original as possible. The blending of seemingly opposite attributes can produce characters of great substance and force. For example, Moshe Rabenu was nursed on Hebrew tradition and educated in Egyptian culture and wisdom. At the same time that he is the humblest of men, he is capable of smiting a fierce Egyptian slave master with one devastating blow. King David is another blend of powerful traits. He too is exceedingly humble, and yet a mighty warrior as well. On the political front, he is as hard as flint, while in the depths of his soul, he is the sweet singer of Israel, composer of everlasting Psalms which have taught the whole world how to love G-d. It is this blend of opposites which makes King David one of the most powerful real-life figures of all time. The more multi-sided a character is, the more interesting he or she will be. But a writer must make sure that his character is always believable. A meek person cannot suddenly perform an act of great prowess unless the potential has been planted within him. Moshe and David were humble because of their transcendental attachment to G-d. But because Moshe was raised in the Pharaoh's palace to be a prince of the kingdom, and because David had to guard his sheep from lions and bears, both men possessed the qualities and strengths to be leaders.

One final note about characterization. Before beginning a story, it helps to write a brief biography of your main character to help you get to know him. Take a page and make some notes. What does he or she look like? What events stick out in his childhood? What kind of books does he read? What are his major beliefs? What are his weaknesses? What is his main goal in life? Describe his connection to G-d.

POINT OF VIEW

Once you have your story idea, theme, plot, and characters, you have to decide how you are going to tell the story. What point of view will allow you to tell the story in the best possible manner. For instance, many stories are told in what is called "third person narrative." This is an omniscient point of view in which the narrator knows everything about all of the characters. The narrator knows even their thoughts. Employing this method of telling the story allows the writer great freedom. He can jump from one character to the next whenever he chooses. One moment, the story is in the Ein Gedi hide-out of David, and the next moment, we are with King Saul in his palace. In one stroke of the pen, the writer can reveal the jealous turmoil

in the mind of the king, and the songs to Hashem in the heart of the fugitive David.

Another point of view is called a “first person narrative.” In this method, the story is told by the character himself, or herself, as the case may be. This allows the reader to feel closer to the character, as if the character is speaking directly to the reader. It can give an added intimacy to the story. For instance, if the story is about a teenager, and the teenager tells the story in the teenage slang of the day, with the teenager’s unique world view, this can bring a refreshing style and tone to the story. But this method tends to restrict the writer somewhat, in that he has to always stay with the character who is telling the story. He can only reveal what that character knows. So before adopting this method, the writer must make certain that it fits the story he wants to relate.

Often a story will be told using the omniscient method of narration, while following the actions of one main character. Usually, we see the story through his eyes, though the writer reserves the freedom to jump wherever and whenever he wants in order to relate things that happen to other people in the story, even though the main character is not present at the time. For example, in my novel, “Tevye in the Promised Land,” the milkman is the main character, dominating the plot of the story. We follow his family’s journey to the Holy Land, and experience the Land’s rebuilding through Tevye’s faith-filled eyes. Yet the narration also jumps to other characters when Tevye is not present in order to follow their development as well.

Whatever point of view the writer chooses, it must be consistent and not change in the middle of the story. Of course, in creative writing, rules can certainly be broken, but the writer must be sure that he doesn’t lose the reader along the way if he opts to relate his story in an unconventional manner. If the reader or viewer becomes confused or put off, then the unorthodox method of storytelling which the author has chosen, even though being creative, may be more of a detriment than a plus.

Chapter Five

PLOT

THE GREATEST STORY EVER TOLD

Once a writer has an idea for a story, a theme, and some characters, it is time to work out a plot. The plot is the series of dramatic events that make up the story. The plot is what happens. Usually, the plot unfolds as characters are put into conflict over the attainment of a common goal. The theme of the story is revealed by the outcome of the plot.

Since it is the plot which illustrates the theme and arouses the emotions of the reader, the plot must be carefully constructed with these goals in mind. Returning to our example from the Exodus, Hashem told Moshe exactly what scenes (that actually happened) to write down in the Torah, so that the story's lessons would be learned, not only intellectually, but emotionally as well. It is through the build-up of the plot, with all of its suspense and action that the reader is brought into the story so that all of his being is affected, his intelligence, emotions, and soul.

It is not accidental that the history of our Forefathers was recorded in story fashion. While the events that occurred could have been listed in a dry chronological fashion, the Torah employs all of the best methods of storytelling to accomplish its goal. It relates the history of our Forefathers in storybook form in order to capture both the hearts and the minds of the generations to follow. Just like in an action packed drama, meek Moshe confronts the most powerful ruler on earth with the demand, "Let my people go!" What will Pharaoh do? How will he react? How can Moshe possibly win? Will the Jews even agree to follow him? No, they rebel.

But that isn't the end. Pharaoh not only refuses to heed Moshe's request, he makes the Jews work harder. The Jews cry out in protest. Again Moshe confronts the mighty ruler of Egypt, and once again, he sends Moshe away. The suspense builds. Again and again the confrontation between the hero and villain is repeated. Emotions begin to soar. Finally, at the sea, the Jews are trapped on all sides. The ocean rages. The chariots of Egypt attack. All hope seems lost. But then, in a breathtaking climax, the Jewish people are saved! The all-powerful G-d of Israel comes to their rescue and the forces of evil are vanquished.

STORY PROBLEM

Thus, a good plot includes a story problem, conflict, complications, crises, and a climax. The plot is acted out by the main character, the hero, while the antagonist attempts to foil the hero in reaching his goal.

The story problem is the motivating force in the story. It is the desire of the main character, or characters, to reach a specific objective or goal. This is the basis for the dramatic conflict that follows. Once again, let's return to the greatest story ever told. In the real life drama that Hashem created to educate the world, played out in the Exodus from Egypt, the story problem is the mission of Moshe to liberate the Jews from Egypt. Everything in the story flows out of this. Moshe is the hero. Pharaoh is the villain. Moshe wants to free the Jews. Pharaoh wants to keep them enslaved. This conflict arouses the reader's emotions. Complications and crises build the suspense.

COMPLICATIONS AND CRISES

First complication – Pharaoh's magicians, just like Moshe, can turn staffs into snakes. Another complication arises when Pharaoh increases the work load of the Jews, which brings them to protest against Moshe. The complications continue, putting greater obstacles in the path of Moshe and Aharon. The plagues of blood and frogs don't persuade Pharaoh. Even when his magicians can't produce lice, Pharaoh's stubborn pride won't allow him free the Jews and let them leave the land. Then, when the next plagues cause Pharaoh to waver, Hashem hardens his heart. Blow after devastating blow rains down on Egypt, but its ruler won't surrender. Then, just when Moshe seems to be getting the upper hand, the Jews are commanded to slaughter lambs – the gods of Egypt. This is more than just another complication. This is a tremendous test for the nations of slaves, placing them in open confrontation with their masters.

But there are still more reversals and twists to come. The plot thickens like a tasty chulent. Pharaoh is no easy opponent. He doesn't give up. Even after his land has been ravaged, his wealth and power destroyed, his pride drowned in the blood of Egypt's firstborn, he continues to chase after the Jews. Not only will Moshe's victory be complete, Pharaoh's defeat will be total. Just as he exalted himself by declaring, "Who is Hashem that I should

fear him?” so will he ignominiously fall before Moshe and “*Shomer Yisrael*” – the Guardian of Israel.

CLIMAX

The climax should be the peak of the plot and the most dramatic part of the story. It is the situation that rescues the hero from his troubles and solves the story problem. Concurrently, it proves the theme of the story.

The climax ends the conflict. The objective of the hero is obtained. For the greatest dramatic effect, the climax should be powerful and decisive, ending in clear victory, or tragic defeat. An important aspect of the climax is that it satisfies the emotions of the reader or viewer. This is accomplished when the tensions of the plot give way to a release of emotion like great happiness, or lead to a great revelation in understanding. This is called a catharsis. In dramas like movies or plays, an effective climax often has a surprise ending. If so, the surprise must be genuine, original, and a plausible outcome of the story.

The climax is the most important part of the story. If you don't have a climax, then you don't have a successful story. It is the climax which makes a lasting impression and drives the story's message home. It must never seem coincidental, as if occurring by chance. Even though there be a surprise, the surprise must have a basis in everything that preceded it in the plot, so that the climax will be accepted as a logical conclusion.

Thus all of the action and drama of the story reach their dramatic crescendo with the climax. The climax does not introduce something new. Rather it resolves everything that was. It brings the story to its conclusion, straightening out the problem. Afterward, everything that happened is understandable and explained by connecting any dangling threads, but no new idea need be added.

Now that we have a better understanding about the ingredients of a successful climax, let's take another look at the greatest climax of all time. Scene after scene, chapter after chapter, like a masterful storyteller, the Almighty fashioned the real-life, historical events of Exodus to teach the world an unforgettable theme. Finally, after a roller coaster of ups and downs, twists and turns, the Israelites are trapped at the sea. All appears lost. Seeing Pharaoh's powerful army, and hearing the thunder of six hundred

chariots, the Jews lose their nerve. They rebel against Moshe. This time it seems that there is no way out of the crisis. With the raging sea before them, and the army of Pharaoh to the rear, the contest is over. The battle is lost. And then, as Pharaoh watches in horrified wonder, Moshe raises his staff, Nachshon leaps into the sea, and the waters miraculously part before the coffin of Yosef. Moshe commands the Jews forward, and the terrified people enter the sea. We are now at the climax of the story. But the danger isn't yet over. Any moment the towering waves may crash down upon them. And the chariots of Egypt are fast on their heels. The situation seems doomed. But true to His promise, Hashem overturns the sea. The Egyptians are drowned. Triumphant, the Children of Israel reach the far shore.

Reading the passages in the Torah, we experience with the Israelites the relief of their salvation and their indescribable joy. Our emotions are given expression by the song at the sea, with their feelings of liberation and thanks.

“Then sang Moshe and Bnei Yisrael this song to the L-rd, and spoke saying, I will sing to the L-rd for He has gloriously triumphed; the horse and the rider he has thrown into the sea. The L-rd is my strength and my song, and He has become my salvation; He is my G-d and I will praise Him; my father's G-d and I will exalt Him” (Shemot, 15:1-2).

Song is the pinnacle of human expression. Witnessing G-d's Hand in shaping our history, our national Jewish soul soared free of all doubts and false doctrines. In the outcome of the breathless climax, the Jews recognized that Hashem alone was King over all of the world, and that we are His Chosen Nation. Reading the Torah, studying its meaning, and retelling the drama on Seder Night, we share the exalted revelation that our Forefathers experienced. Reading the story of the Exodus, it is as if we were there ourselves. This is the power of storytelling. This is why the story form of the Hagaddah is used on Pesach night. Recounting and reliving the drama of leaving Egypt, we are brought to the zenith of belief in Hashem, with all of our being, in our hearts, in our minds, and our souls. Through the dramatic plot of the Exodus and its climax at the sea, the soul of every individual Jew, and the united soul of Clal Yisrael for all generations to come, were uplifted to see, beyond any doubt, the true spiritual foundation of the world. Even simple handmaids experienced a revelation greater than the visions of the prophet Ezekiel. We experience this revelation, in miniature, every time we read the story. The suspense-filled plot brings us to a stirring climax which reveals the theme of all themes.

This is what storytelling does best. As Rav Kook teaches, “The world will be elevated to realize the great and subtle power of literature – the uplifting of the spiritual foundation of the world with all of its prowess” (*Orot HaTechiya* 36).

But in order to do this, we must first master the art of storytelling, in all of its elements and mediums.

PLOT ELEMENTS

When one sets out to choose a plot, it should be the most significant period in the lives of the characters. For instance, the Torah skips over the forty years Moshe spent in Midian because they are not central to the story. The complications befalling the main character should be arranged so that each complication is more severe than the preceding one. In the same manner, the story problem should be strong enough to interest the reader from the start. If the story problem is strong, the conflicts will be strong also. The goal of the hero should be clear to the reader, and it should be introduced toward the beginning of the story. This will strengthen the drama. Concurrently, the complications and situations that occur in the story should heighten the character’s desire to realize his goal. They should force him or her to employ all of his wisdom, resources, and strength.

Along with the theme, the hero’s goal is a unifying factor of the story, since all of the action of the plot is based on the hero’s efforts to achieve his goal. This goal gives unity of action to the plot. In fact, all of the action in the story should be directly related to the story problem or goal. No irrelevant events should be included. Some sagas follow two different characters in an intertwining plot, but each character must stay true to his or her goal throughout the narrative. To avoid a wandering and confusing plot, a story should begin and end with the same problem. Will the hero triumph over the villain? Will the detective catch the criminal? Will Mordechai save the Jews?

No matter how interesting situations may be, if they are not tied in with the story problem, then they have no place in the plot. Sometimes, a side action can be used to strengthen the story problem in a roundabout way, like the story of Yehuda and Tamar in the midst of the saga of Yosef. Though at

first, it appears as a digression, it comes to heighten the conflict between the two brothers, Yehuda and Yosef, over the ultimate kingship of Am Yisrael.

STORY PROBLEM AND THEME

One last item. It is important to point out the difference between story problem and theme. The story problem is the character's struggle to attain a specific goal. The theme is the intellectual deduction that arises out of achieving that goal. It is the message that comes out of the outcome of the story. In the Exodus, the story problem is getting the Jews out of Egypt. The theme is the Kingship of Hashem in the world and the Divine Selection of Israel in bringing about world Redemption. Thus, the story problem motivates the situations of the plot in order to bring out the theme.

The climax brings the story problem and theme together. At the climax, when the character's goal is attained, the theme is affirmed. At the Red Sea, Moshe leads the Jews to freedom, fulfilling his mission, and Hashem is universally recognized as the G-d of Israel, the one and only King of heaven and earth.

One other word about endings. It is the vogue among many Israeli writers, filmmakers, and dramatists to conclude their works with unhappy endings. This often stems from their disconnection to the Torah and from their secular world view which lacks the belief that "everything is for the best." Sure, there are problems and tribulations in Israel, and many sad and tragic events. But a writer should ask himself, "Do I want to add to people's depression and despair?" Just because a story is sad and depressing doesn't mean it is good. Artists who lack faith sometimes think that a story filled with darkness is filled with deep meaning. But this is not so. A deeper understanding sees that even life's difficulties are all for the good. It is in a writer's hands to either strengthen or weaken the reader, to lead him to light, or to let him wallow in gloom, to add faith or to increase evil. So remember when choosing your stories and themes that it is a mitzvah to be always happy!

Chapter Six

DRAMA

The word drama is derived from the Greek word meaning “to act.” Drama refers to some type of action. The story, which is also known as the plot, is the description of the action that takes place. Every good story has a problem that needs to be worked out. For instance, a typical story problem is, “Will the hero triumph over the villain?” In an adventure romance, the problem can be phrased, “Will the hero rescue the heroine the girl?” Another type of story problem is, “How will the detective solve the case?” The story problem is worked out as the hero strives to reach his goal. In the process, he is continuously being opposed by the antagonist. The resulting conflict between them produces the drama.

The Greeks worked out a whole theory of drama. Aristotle’s treatise “Poetics” lays down the rules of drama in a concise, exacting format. Ancient Greek theater is considered the originator of all dramatic art. But, as we previously noted, the truth is that the Jews beat them to it by almost over one thousand years with the giving of the Torah. In fact, all of the foundations of drama can be found in the very first chapter of the Torah in the story of Adam and Eve.

This is the world’s first dramatic triad with an easily recognizable hero, heroine, and villain. The hero is Adam, the heroine is Eve, and the snake is the archetype villain. Adam’s goal is to serve G-d. The snake’s goal is to cause Adam to fall so that he can have Eve for himself. This conflict is the source of the drama. So deeply has the story of Adam and Eve penetrated the psyche of mankind, it has become the format for all dramatic writing until this very day.

The Greeks didn’t invent drama – they copied it from the Jews. To be more exact, credit must be given to the author of the Torah, to the Creator Himself. The Greeks made storytelling into an art when they developed the theater. Unfortunately, most of it is so filled with idol worship, it is unhealthy to read. But Aristotle’s book, “Poetics,” is fine, as long as you remember that it is a secular understanding of life and art.

Aristotle taught that effective drama demanded a definite structure, possessing a beginning, middle, and end. The German dramatist, Gustav

Freytag, expanded Aristotle's analysis, basing his theory on Greek and Shakespearean dramas. According to Freytag, a drama is divided into five parts, called acts. He termed these acts: exposition, rising action, climax or turning point, falling action, and denouement or resolution. During the exposition, the background of the story is introduced, along with the main characters and the main conflict. This act ends with a dramatic situation that motivates the rest of the story.

In the second act, the action rises in intensity with increasing conflict and builds to a major crisis. The third act contains the story's climax, which brings a change, for better or worse, in the life of the hero or heroine. In a tragedy, things begin to go downhill, and in a comedy, the situation takes a turn for the better. During the falling action, the conflict between the hero and antagonist unravels toward a conclusion. Often in this act, there is a big moment of suspense, where the outcome is in doubt. The resolution decides the conflict and brings it to an end. A tragedy ends in catastrophe for the hero, while a comedy results in a happy ending. While this five-act analysis is most applied to stage drama or dramatic films, it can also be found in novels as well.

Fortunately, we don't have to rely on the Greeks or the Germans. Instead of studying Greek plays to learn about drama, we can use earlier Jewish sources. For example, the true-life stories of the Exodus and Megillat Esther contain all of the ingredients of exciting drama while setting forth holy, Jewish themes.

For instance, in the story of stories, Moshe Rabenu wants to free the Jews. Pharaoh wants to keep them enslaved. Their conflict provides for the drama of the Exodus. As we discussed, the climactic salvation at the sea brings about the triumphant revelation of G-d, something that we relive in our prayers every day. In a similar manner, Haman wants to destroy the Jews. Mordechai wants to save them. When the tables are turned and the Jews are victorious, there is a tremendous catharsis and joy, a dramatic reversal that once again leads to the revelation of G-d in the world. Thus with every reading of the Megilla, Jews of all generations are filled with "light and gladness, joy and honor." The goal of these real life stories from the Bible, which, in the language of drama, is known as their themes, is to strengthen our connection to G-d.

THE HERO

In a drama, the story problem is acted out by the main character, known as the protagonist or hero. It is the goal of the hero or heroine that dominates the story. The strength of his or her desire creates the motivating force of the plot. To build dramatic impact, the goal must be difficult to achieve. Nothing should come easily. The hero must struggle mightily to achieve his objective. He has to overcome obstacles and escape complications. His struggles to overcome the opposition against him arouse the sympathy of the reader and seize the reader's emotions. The greater the obstacles, the greater the reader involvement and emotional pull. For instance, sympathy is increased when the hero must overcome injustices thrown in his path. We don't know very much about Moshe as a youth, but when he is forced to flee Egypt because he defended a Jew, our sympathy in his plight is aroused.

Thus drama is created when the main character desires something greatly and directs all of his efforts to obtain it, despite major opposition, until a definite climax is reached. While the hero must try to solve all predicaments on his own, he can be assisted by those close to him, like with the examples of Aharon helping Moshe, and Esther helping Mordechai. But generally, the main character should not sit passively and watch the story develop – **he should make these developments happen himself as he battles with the opposing force.**

Because the story is about the will and goal of the hero, he or she should be a positive person, sympathetic to the reader. The hero's desire should be a worthwhile one. When writing a Jewish story, the author should be careful to give his hero a truly Jewish goal. For example, the figure of a Mafia chief is a questionable Jewish hero. Even though he safeguards his family with steadfast loyalty, the killing of business enemies is still a transgression, even if they are involved in immoral gain, just as he is. Do we really want our readers to identify with killers and thieves, however noble they may seem?

Whatever the hero's goal, he should stick to it until the end. If a character changes his goal in the middle of a story, the reader will be confused. Because the actions of the hero make up the story, it is best to follow his point of view. This creates unity of action and generates dramatic intensity. The other characters are portrayed by the way they influence the hero. However in creative writing and drama, rules can be broken, and there is no one-and-only right way. In these essays, we are setting down basic, widely-

accepted fundamentals of good storytelling, but these are to be understood as guidelines, not hard and fast rules. For instance, in stories with multiple characters like family sagas and historical novels, a writer can jump from character to character, each time following his or her point of view, in order to weave a tapestry that will come together in the end around the main character of the story.

THE TRAGIC HERO

The tragic hero is a good person who fails to reach his goal and achieve full success because of some flaw in his character. Greek drama abounds with tragic heroes. Perhaps the most famous, Oedipus, grows up as an orphan. When he reaches manhood, he unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother. Certainly, from a Jewish point of view, this is not a very inspiring tale. Nevertheless, it is one of the classics of world drama. In his quest to discover his origins, when Oedipus comes to the horrifying revelation that he killed his own father and married his mother, he takes his own life. This is a tragic hero, because in finding out who he is, he dies. Shakespeare's tragic hero, Hamlet, is a variation of the same story. The young Danish prince is driven to kill his uncle who has murdered Hamlet's father and married Hamlet's mother. But Hamlet, who has apparently, according to Freudian theory, harbored these secret wishes himself, cannot find the resolution to act. His procrastination and obsession with his own repressed "Oedipal Conflict" brings about his failure and tragic demise.

Both Oedipus and Hamlet are good people who are unable to overcome flaws in their character. Once again, the tragic hero is not a Greek invention. The prototype tragic hero is Adam, the first man of Creation. Out of his excessive love for Eve, he falls. Knowing that she is going to die, he chooses to die with her by eating the forbidden fruit.

Probably the most famous Jewish tragic hero is Samson. The holy Samson sets out to save Israel from the Philistines, but he is tragically drawn after his eyes. Our Sages teach that the holier the man, the greater his evil inclination. Samson falls a victim to his, over-confident that his great spiritual prowess will protect him. Blinded, he is made a laughing stock by the Philistines. Though he triumphs over the enemy in the end, he too tragically dies. Because the plight of the tragic hero grabs the heart of the reader, tragedies can communicate powerful lessons. However, characterizations must be carefully drawn. While tragic heroes are often bigger than life, they must be

sympathetic, believable people in order for the reader to identify with their challenges and downfalls.

THE VILLAIN

Opposing the main character is the villain, or antagonist, as called by the Greeks. His goal is directly opposed to the hero's. At every opportunity, he tries to prevent the hero from reaching his objective. His counter efforts produce the conflict and drama.

This being the case, the antagonist must be a worthy opponent to the hero. He must put up a good battle. The conflict should be evenly balanced, so that the reader is held in suspense, not knowing who will win. For instance, Pharaoh is no push over. Nor is the evil Haman a bumbling fool. To overcome arch villains like these, Moshe and Mordechai are stretched to the limits of their wisdom and faith. In a dramatic story, the villain can seem to be invincible, so that the hero must use all of his power and wits to defeat him. In a story with a happy ending, the hero finally triumphs. If the story is a tragedy, then the hero is overcome.

The antagonist should be a bad person, even though he may have some admirable qualities. Generally, he is relentless in carrying out his ambition. He is strong, single-minded, and selfish. His motives should be understandable, though his purpose is not one to be valued. Esav, Lavan, and Bilaam are prototype villains, to name but a few.

Villains come in all shapes and sizes. They needn't be purely evil, like the villains in fairytales and cartoons. A villain can have good qualities, and he should be plausible in his wickedness, but even if he has good qualities, he must have some bad trait that overrides his good. An excellent example is King Saul. One cannot call him a villain, G-d forbid. He is a tzaddik, head and shoulders above his generation, not only in height, but in modesty and good deeds. Nonetheless, he is the force opposing David's rise to the throne. He is more a tragic hero, than a villain. Any negative trait that he has stems from the melancholy caused by his sin in the war with Agag, and not from outright evil. Still, he does not want to relinquish the kingship of Israel and sees David as his arch rival. Thus, great as he is, his failure to obey the command of Hashem, and his resultant depression and jealousy of David, bring him to a tragic fall.

Thus, we see from the example of King Saul that the antagonist opposing the hero need not always be evil. Joseph's brothers cast him into a pit, not because they are wicked, but because they suspect him of usurping the leadership of the family, which is meant to be the inheritance of the descendants of Yehuda. Similarly, the Jews who find fault with Moshe are not all inherently bad – they simply don't have Moshe's supreme level of faith and righteousness. Or to take a mundane example not from the Torah, the police may try to arrest the hero of a story, not because they are bad, but because they have been given false evidence against him.

Another type of antagonist may be not a person at all. An opposing force can be a storm at sea, a mountain to climb, an economic depression, or an evil political state. An opposing force can also arise within the hero himself in the guise of an unbridled passion, an obsessive character trait, or trauma from the past. The main thing to remember is that, in order to create powerful drama, forces and characters have to be placed in opposition with conflicting goals. In a short story, the writer can be less bombastic, maintaining the reader's attention through literary description, atmosphere, setting, and mood, but in writing a full-length novel, movie, or play, powerful conflict, in one form or another, is the key to a successful story.

Chapter Seven

CONFLICT, ACTION, AND SUSPENSE

CONFLICT

So far we have learned that drama is created when the will of one character opposes that of another. Characters or forces in opposition create conflict, which stirs the emotions of the reader or viewer. Once the reader is involved and identifying with the characters, the skillful writer can influence the reader's thoughts and emotions and lead him to a catharsis - an emotional and intellectual discovery that brings him to a new level of understanding and feeling.

Conflict needn't be the violent physical action familiar to the movies. It can be the small, every-day conflicts of family life. Or it can be an inner emotional or intellectual conflict where a character wages war with two sides of his or her personality, like in famous Shakespeare play, "Hamlet."

A character can be pitted in a conflict and struggle with the environment, as when the captain of a ship must navigate the way through a violent storm. Similarly, a character can be at war with society and the established way of doing things. Or the hero can wage a battle against social prejudice like anti-Semitism. Even comedies have conflict. For instance, let's say a wacky professor discovers a type of rubber sneaker that allows basketball players to jump ten feet in the air. The conflict comes when the formula is stolen by bad guys and the professor has to get it back.

The life of King David is one conflict after the next; conflict with his brothers, with Goliath, with King Saul, with his wife, Michal, with warring nations, with Absalom his son, and on and on.

Since conflict produces suspense, it is wise to introduce the main conflict early in the story. If the reader is moved to ask "What will be?" he will continue turning the book's pages and munching away at his popcorn. Once the conflict is introduced, the story problem should be made clear. For example in the true life story of Moshe Rabenu, once the background in Egypt has been established, we are introduced to the future savior of the enslaved Jewish People. We sympathize with his dilemma, when he, a prince of Egypt, sees the suffering of his Hebrew brothers. The story's

conflict is made concrete when Moshe kills the Egyptian slave master and Pharaoh orders his death. The story problem is sharpened even more when G-d tells Moshe to return to Egypt and liberate the Jews. This brings the conflict to a boil. Like two opposing fighters, the hero and villain square off in the center of the ring. True, Moshe has G-d on his side, but Pharaoh is still a formidable foe. He is ruler of the world's most powerful nation and master of occult art and witchcraft. When his magicians succeed in matching Moshe's early wonders, we are promised a fight to the finish.

It is conflict that creates the movement and action of the story as each of the two opposing forces strive to attain their goals. Because conflict produces the drama which engages the reader in the story, it must be sustained and heightened right up to the end in order to bring about a powerful climax.

ACTION

We have learned that action stems from conflict as the characters struggle to reach their goals. Some stories have plots filled with powerful action, while other stories are more subtle, relying heavily on mood and description.

Since the concept of action is often associated with the fast-paced, violence-packed sequences of the movies, we want to emphasize that action is much more than a technique to keep the viewer glued to his seat, or to keep the reader turning pages. Action is the representation of the story idea. It is the action of the story that reveals the theme. In a well-structured story, this should take place at the climax. As we mentioned, the world came to recognize the supreme greatness of Hashem through the things that happened in Egypt and through the salvation of Israel at the sea. Similarly, to bring Yitro to this same, deep understanding, Moshe did not teach him the secrets of Kabbalah, rather he simply told him the story of what happened to the Jews, as it is written:

“And Moshe told his father-in-law all that the L-rd had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt for the sake of Yisrael, and all of the travail that had come upon them along the way, and how the L-rd delivered them.... And Yitro rejoiced for all of the goodness which the L-rd had done to Yisrael, whom he had delivered out of the hand of Egypt. And Yitro said... Now I know that the L-rd is greater than all gods....” (Shemot, 18:8-11).

The story of what happened in the Exodus was what led Yitro to a higher understanding of G-d.

FILM ACTION

In a movie, action is one of the most important requirements of the plot. It is the visible manifestation of the conflict. Unlike a novel which is built out of words, a film is built up through images. In a novel, the reader imagines the action which the writer describes. In a film, the action is seen. It is physical action that can be photographed. Thus a good filmmaker looks for the visual actions that will tell the story and reveal the theme, rather than relying on the novelist's tools of description, speech, and thought.

As we will explain in the chapter on screenwriting, thoughts cannot be photographed. They must be visually suggested. If you put a picture of an expressionless man next to the picture of a smiling baby, the viewer will say that the man is happy. If you put the very same picture of the man, with the very same lack of expression, next to a picture of a grave, the viewer will say that the man is sad. Thus thoughts can be portrayed through the juxtaposition of images. This concept is one of the basics of filmmaking and editing. A camera can only record visual images and actions. It cannot picture thoughts. Therefore, visual and physical actions must mirror the inner life of the character. In effect, the character is what he does. Therefore in a film, action and the skillful use of visualization is of paramount importance.

In a novel or stage play, the action need not be as dominant and physical as it is in the movies. Depth of emotion and subtlety of deed can also make for compelling drama. For instance, the intimate drama of the story of Ruth lacks the intrigues and theatrical drama of Megillat Ester, but it is riveting reading none the less.

MOTIVATION

Whether stormy or quiet, the action in a story must always be motivated. There must be a motive behind every act, a reason for it, and that reason must be directly connected to the story problem and theme. If action has nothing to do with moving the plot along, it is better omitted. While there is sometimes a need for incidents of character development, and for comic relief, they must in some way serve the plot.

Every step in the building of a story must be well motivated. Things must not just happen as if by happenstance. For instance, if a writer finds that he is stuck in his plot, he shouldn't suddenly introduce an angel who miraculously appears on the scene and sets everything in order. If a character has prayed for Divine assistance, and then an angel appears, this could be acceptable, if it is in line with the themes of the story. But as we said, the narration should develop from within, from the doings of the characters and their interactions, rather than relying on artificial, external solutions, like angels or the sudden, unmotivated appearance of a foreign army to move the plot along.

Well-reasoned, motivated action is the cement that binds the plot together. Motivation links one incident to the next. Without it, the story would fall apart.

The same principle of motivation holds true for characterization. Every character must have a reason for being in the story. Every deed must have a reason. This requires a good deal of thinking on the part of the writer. If the hero does something that is foreign to his character, the reader will be alienated. He will cease to believe in the story. For example, it is not reasonable that a youth unskilled in battle would dare to wage combat against a fearsome giant like Goliath, but the young David is motivated by a powerful desire to sanctify the Name of G-d and prove that there is a living G-d in Israel. In addition, David has slain bears and lions in the past. He is also expert at hurling stones, and has a special secret connection with Hashem which makes him trust that Divine assistance will come to his aid. All of these give him the motivation to accept the giant's challenge. While David's victory over Goliath is surprising in the stunning ease with which he carries it out, our understanding that David is no ordinary youth makes his deed credible. However, if anyone else had done the same, the victory would not have been plausible, and we would have to stretch the limits of our imaginations to believe in the tale.

Motivation also insures that the plot will flow logically from one incident to the next. This prevents the story from branching off into side plots that frustrate the reader or viewer. If the action is well motivated and logical, then the conclusion will be logical as well. In a story like the Exodus where G-d is an active presence, then miracles are OK. The reader accepts the Heavenly intervention as a reasonable part of the plot. But if hailstones

suddenly rain down from heaven to overcome the villain in a story where the Almighty has never been mentioned, then the reader will balk. The action won't ring true and the story will not be effective.

PLAUSIBILITY

Everything that occurs in a story should seem plausible. The events that take place must seem like logical developments of the plot. We mentioned the example of David and Goliath. However, the mere fact that something has happened in real life does not necessarily make it credible in a story. For instance, there have been instances when a person was clinically dead, then came back to life. This would be perfectly fitting to use in a story about rectification and t'shuva, where the character uses this experience as a springboard for change. But just to have an extraordinary event in a story as a sensational happening, without it being integrally connected to the plot, this is an irrelevance that could damage the reader's faith in the storyteller.

Unbelievable, out-of-the-ordinary events cannot be used to make a story work. Certainly, a good story is made up of original situations. Flights of imagination and fantasy can be wonderful. One can write about creatures from outer space, talking animals, and elephants that fly, but it all must be fitting to the context of the story. A writer must remain true to the world that he or she has created.

Characterization must also be credible. If a character is introduced as timid, he cannot overnight be transformed into someone who is super brave. This does not mean that a character cannot change. To the contrary, character change is an important element in bringing a story to a cathartic climax, but the change should be gradually developed and plausible to the sense of belief.

Action does not necessarily have to be true to life, but it must **seem** true to life. In my novel, *Tevye in the Promised Land*, there is a very moving reunion when Golda's coffin is washed up on shore. Now if we were to analyze the actual chances of the coffin coming to rest on the very beach where Tevye was standing, the chances would be infinitely small. After all, the Mediterranean Sea is a very great body of water. Nevertheless, the scene works wonderfully. The reader accepts it, because in Tevye's world, miracles are a part of life. However, if in some totally secular story, the hero would be saved by a sudden act of G-d, all credibility would be lost. The

plot would not be convincing. When this happens, the reader's belief in the story is shattered. He can no longer pretend that the story he is reading is real.

When a reader opens a book, or when someone watches a movie, they are ready to make a pact with the author or filmmaker. They are prepared to pretend that the book or film is real life. Even in a fantasy novel like "Harry Potter" the reader is prepared to suspend his disbelief and believe in the tale. This enables him to get involved with the characters and identify with their plight. It lets the reader vicariously experience the same ups and downs of the hero. Once the writer has captured the emotions of the reader, he can skillfully lead him to the ideas and themes he wants to express. When the hero is brought to a moment of self-discovery, the reader will discover it too. But when something unbelievable happens, the reader's connection to the story is severed. He remembers that he is reading a book, or watching a movie, and any emotional involvement he had with the hero immediately is broken. So a writer must remember to ask all through the writing, "Is this action believable in the context of the story, or am I going to lose my reader by straining his sense of belief?"

A plot can not be built upon coincidence and chance. Often a beginning writer will get his hero into such a complicated situation that he can't find a way out. Instead of retracing his steps and doing some painstaking rewriting, he creates some coincidence to help the character out of his predicament. For instance, if an elderly man is being chased down the street by the villain who is a champion athlete, then the old man is sure to be caught. To avoid this, the writer has a drunken driver suddenly screech around the corner and run over the villain. If the driver is never going to appear again in the story, then this is poor writing. The action is not motivated from within. It does not evolve from their deeds. In a story, the characters must be masters of their own destiny. The hero must get out of the predicament through his own efforts, or with the help of friends who have already been established as an integral part of the story – and not as a result of chance fate.

As we mentioned, Jewish stories are different from stories in which G-d is not present, nor a part of the lives of the characters. Jews believe in Divine Providence. Jews believe in miracles. Jews understand that everything that happens is scripted by G-d. There is no problem when G-d splits open the Red Sea to save the Jews, because G-d Himself is the hero of the story. Yet even in the true historical recounting of the Exodus, where an act of G-d

saves the day for the Jews, even here, the main human characters, the Jews, motivate the story. In effect, the Jews cause G-d to act. They call out for salvation. They offer the Pesach lamb, perform the mitzvah of circumcision, and put the blood on their doorposts. They leave their homes in haste before their dough can bake. At the sea, they cry out to G-d in distress. Brave Nachshon leads the way into the turbulent waters. It is their faith to move forward that brings G-d to act. So the Divine Intervention is not out of the blue, it is not accidental, rather it is brought about by the actions of the characters in the story.

SUSPENSE

While the use of suspense is most obvious in the making of movies, every story form has some sort of suspense. Suspense is what keeps the reader turning the book's pages, and what keeps the viewer in his seat. It is used to intensify one's interest in the story.

The main element of suspense is wanting to know what's going to happen. The writer must be constantly creative, deriving interesting situations where the hero is faced with a problem, so that the reader wants to know how things will turn out. This is achieved by creating a situation of doubt where the outcome is not immediately clear. Until the outcome is decided, the suspense can be maintained. Suspense is created whenever the hero is put into danger, or by putting an obstacle in the way of his goal. For instance, in a romance, suspense is created if a competitor steals away the hero's sweetheart. We are kept in suspense wanting to know if he will succeed in winning her back.

Once again, suspense needn't be the big action suspense of the movies. It can be emotional suspense when one identifies with a character and lives vicariously through his quest, or intellectual suspense when one wants to know the reason behind the actions of the characters. Whatever type of suspense that the writer employs, he should always keep the reader wondering what will happen next.

One way to achieve this is by making sure the opponents in the conflict are balanced in their skills. It is also OK if the villain seems more powerful than the hero. This forces the hero to summon all of his inner resources, creativity, and strength. Not knowing who will win the battle is the device that keeps the reader on edge.

Suspense can also be created when the reader or viewer knows more than the hero. This device is known as dramatic irony. For instance, let's say that the hero is on a river raft, trying to escape from pursuers. If we know that there is a dangerous waterfall up ahead that the hero doesn't see, we feel suspense in our hearts for his safety. By introducing a sudden complication and heating up the conflict, suspense will be intensified. In our example of a romance, if the hero's sweetheart is whisked away to another country, while the hero sits in jail for a crime he didn't commit, this added predicament will force the hero to break out of jail at all costs. Needless to say, the reader will turn the page in great suspense, wanting to know what will happen.

Suspense should always build towards the climax. Each situation in the drama should be more suspenseful than the preceding one. This keeps the reader absorbed in the drama. When a character is faced with conflict, and the outcome is hidden, the reader feels suspense. The more the reader or viewer is in doubt regarding what is going to happen, the greater will be the suspense. If the reader can figure out what will transpire; if he senses in advance how the hero is going to get out of his problem, then all story tension is lost.

COMIC RELIEF

Constant suspense is impossible. A reader or viewer simply can't bear it. Every once in a while, the mind and the nervous system need to relax. Comic relief serves this purpose very well. It does not break the suspense completely, or spoil the action, because the action and suspense start up immediately again. The comic relief provides a needed break and contrast to the seriousness of the drama. In fact, it makes the drama stand out even more. But it is a technique that shouldn't be overused, and it should fit in with the content of the story.

Chapter Eight

SCREENWRITING

While the basic ingredients of a good story, like plot, conflict, character, and suspense, apply to all forms of story writing, whether for novels, stage plays, or movies, there are certain key elements of screenwriting which need to be stressed. Among them, visualization and dialogue are two things which often trouble beginning writers.

VISUALIZATION

One important difference between a movie and a book is that a film story is seen, and not told. While a novel uses words and sentences to tell a story, a film uses pictures. The story unfolds in scenes of visual action. Thus, all of the action must be capable of being photographed by a camera.

In a novel, descriptions of thoughts and emotions play a central part of the story. In a film, verbal descriptions of thoughts of emotions don't work. Since thoughts and emotions cannot be filmed, they must be translated into visuals and visual action that can be filmed.

We mentioned how thoughts, ideas, and emotions can be expressed by the juxtaposition of images. For instance, if an audience is shown a shot of a man in prison, gazing out between the bars of the window in his cell, and then is shown a shot of a bird flying in the air, the viewer will think that the prisoner is longing for freedom. Or if we are shown a man placing flowers at a grave, juxtaposed with a blurry, slow-motion image of a woman running along a beach, we will feel wistful, as if the mourner is longing for his late, beloved wife. This writing through images, a modern-day form of hieroglyphics, is the key to effective screenwriting. In movies, characters should not explain what they are thinking or feeling, rather their thoughts and inner emotions must be shown through actions and images.

Occasionally, a beginner writer will have a character speak directly to the viewer, through the device of a letter that he or she is writing, or through the use of a diary, but this should be avoided unless it is an integral part of the story. For instance, in a movie like, "The Diary of Anne Frank," which tells

the real life story of a girl hiding from the Nazis, this technique was used effectively because Anne Frank actually wrote a diary during her ordeal.

Everyone has favorite scenes that they remember from the movies. Usually these involve powerful visual elements and visual action. Beginning writers often have difficulty making effective use of visuals and telling their story in a visual way. Remember that the story will be **seen** and not read. If the writer visualizes the story in his, or her, mind, imagining the flow of the action, and then simply records on paper what one sees on the screen of his mind, he will be writing in visual images. The screenwriter should habituate himself to visualize each situation and scene of the plot. Then all that needs to be done is to describe in writing, in the proper screenplay format, what he has seen.

Similarly, the screenwriter must **show** what the characters of the story want. It is OK to have a character reveal his or her goal in a line of dialogue when speaking with someone. For instance, if an amateur boxer is given the opportunity to fight the heavyweight champ (like in the film, “Rocky”), he could say to his wife, “I just want to be on my feet at the final bell.” Nonetheless, the film must make a point of showing him actively pursuing this goal as he prepares himself for the upcoming event. The characters must act out their goals. Everything must be giving visual expression. It is the same with themes, and philosophical ideas. These must not be spoken aloud like in a lecture. While dialogue is necessary in a film, actions are stronger than words. A good screenwriter will try to dress up the inner life of his characters in action, through strong visual writing and the proper juxtaposition of images. Or they should be expressed through the dramatic plot of the story, and through the visual outcome of the drama.

DIALOGUE

We learned that a screenplay should tell the story through visualization, and not through literary or verbal description. A screenwriter should not rely on dialogue to tell his tale. Many beginners make this mistake and have their characters speak the story, rather than act it out. Don’t overdo conversations. While dialogue is certainly a part of any film, what the characters do, rather than what they say, should determine the movement of the story.

While dialogue is the substance of stage dramas, too much talking in a movie makes it boring. A movie viewer wants to see action, not see a

photographed stage play. Characters in movies should do things and not talk about them. I remember one of my teachers saying that the test of a good movie was whether it would interest a deaf person. He wanted to emphasize that the visual action should “tell” the story. Therefore, a practiced writer will not have a character verbally disclose what is happening to another character, he will show it happening.

Having said this, it is important to stress that dialogue, when used well, can be a valuable tool in revealing the thoughts, emotions, fears, and goals of the story’s characters. When used it must be believable. What a character says must be true to his personality. Therefore good dialogue must ring true. It should sound natural. If you listen carefully to people speaking to each other, most of the time they refer to things in a roundabout manner. They beat around the bush without stating their thoughts and their feelings directly. Usually, people talk about their thoughts and the things that they do without explaining them and the deep reasons behind them. It is true that with the popularity of lay psychology today, psychological terms and explanations often find their way into conversations, but this is a no-no for films. Once again, characters and their actions should be seen, not explained in awkward, lengthy discourses that can sometimes have value in a stage play, but not in a motion picture. A motion picture is exactly what the name implies – pictures that move. Pictures and not mere words.

One final tip concerning dialogue. If you are writing about a policeman, hang around some policemen and listen to how they speak. If you are writing about a soldier, spend some time with soldiers and pick up their slang. In the same way that people look different from one another, they sound differently from one another when they speak. A good writer should capture the unique nuances of his characters’ speech. Characters shouldn’t all sound the same.

THE JEWISH SCREENWRITER

Movies are unquestionably a powerful form of media with worldwide influence. Unfortunately, this power has been used in many negative and damaging fashions. For instance, when judged in the light of the Torah, many films have been used to communicate immoral and heretical messages, antithetical to Jewish teachings. For instance, an entertaining Hollywood comedy might tell the story of a Jewish man and Gentile woman who fall in love against the will of their parents and live happily ever after. In Israel,

films have been made which portray Israel as the brutal conqueror of the innocent Palestinians. These falls into the category of propaganda films, which are produced to brainwash the viewer with the beliefs of the filmmaker.

When it comes to films of pure entertainment, because films cost an exorbitant amount of money to make, they have to make money to return the investment. This means that films have to sell tickets and appeal to mass audiences. Because of this, they often appeal to the baser instincts in man. Through the use of sight, sound, and imagination, a skillful screenwriter can compose a screen story that can arouse a whirlpool of emotions in the viewer. He can structure scenes that arouse reactions of fear, suspense, sadness, laughter, shock, cruelty, violence, and lust. Very often, the passions that a Jew is called upon to balance and control, are given free reign in films. In this way, films can bring out the uglier aspects of man. An obvious example of this would be a romantic love story that substitutes emotions of lust for the deeper, holy purity of real love. And while a film like “Rocky” may be a rousing, powerhouse of a story, with a redeeming theme of the power of belief, the emotions of brutality and violence that accompany it are anathema to the sensitive Jewish soul. The powerful emotions of lust, violence, and anger that are evoked by many popular movies are precisely the baser emotions of man that Rabbi Kook says should be buried, as we learned in the Introduction to this manual.

Jewish screenwriters and filmmakers have the responsibility not to put a stumbling block before a blind man, and not to use the film medium to arouse the baser sides of the viewer. Rather, the film craft should be used to elevate, inspire, and entertain in a wholesome manner. They should strive for modesty, depth, and substance, adhering to the guidelines of Jewish Law, and bring people closer to Hashem. Thus, the subject matter of the story, and the way it is told, should be given great thought before beginning to write. Our Sages teach that in the days to come, theaters will turn into *beit midrashim* - halls for the study of Torah. A Jewish screenwriter can do this already today by his choice of subject matter, and by adding a sense of responsibility and the fear of G-d to the techniques of his craft.

Chapter Nine

THE SCRIPT

Since many young people today learn about television and moviemaking, and because the film, video, and digital media have a powerful impact on public opinion, this chapter is designed to familiarize the novice with some basic elements of the scriptwriting. There are a few standard formats to the script, some for TV and others for movie screenplays. To explain matters in a clear and simple fashion, a sample script format is included in this chapter, based on a famous story about Rabbi Akiva. The principle element in scriptwriting is not the script format, but rather clear and concise writing, which succinctly describes what will appear on the screen. Nevertheless, if you want your script to be read, it has to resemble the format that film industry people are accustomed to seeing.

Essentially, a script is the working blueprint of the film. It is a guide for the director, producer, production manager, cameraman, the actors and crew. The script does not merely tell the story, it tells the movie team all of the things necessary for the production, from location needs, lighting equipment, acting extras to the number of days required to film all of the scenes. Besides indicating how the film will be shot, the script enables the producer to determine the necessary budget, including the cost of equipment, hotels, food, travel expenses and the like. While budgetary factors may not be part of the creative side of filmmaking, without money for the budget there won't be a film.

The scriptwriter must always remember that a screenplay is not a novel. The script is more than a recounting of the story – it is also a technical manual detailing the needs of the production. While the screenwriter doesn't need to specify equipment and hotels, he has to write the script in a conventional format so that the experienced director and production manager can discern what is needed in a glance. Also, on the creative side, the screenwriter must strive to tell the story visually, always keeping the goal in mind that the end product will be **seen** and not read. The words and sentences in the screenplay are not the end product, and therefore, the scriptwriter need not possess flowering language or a literary style. Ultimately, the words and sentences which he or she writes will end up as a long series of pictures, moving images interspersed with dialogue. Therefore, clarity and simplicity are keys to successful screenwriting, both for the technical side of a movie

or TV production, and for the visual side as well.

As we noted, a film is composed not of words and sentences, but rather of “shots” – the images, one after another that are edited together to tell the story. The screenwriter describes what the shots will look like. How is this done? Close your eyes and pretend to project on a screen your thoughts and the pictures you imaging in your mind. Then write down what “you see” in your mind in a clear and concise fashion. For example, close your eyes and imaging that Rabbi Akiva is leading his donkey toward a walled village. What does he look like? What is he wearing? Is the donkey carrying anything on its back. What time of day is it? What does the village look like? Now write it all down as simply as possible. Wonderful! You’ve written a shot. Now imaging the next image with the camera of your mind – a gatekeeper swings closed the towering gate of the village. Write down what you see. You’re on your way to writing a scene! Shot after shot after shot. It’s as simple as that.

While dialogue is an essential part of a movie (ever since Charlie Chaplin started to speak) the visual side of the film is what will remain ingrained in the viewer’s mind. Therefore the scriptwriter must be careful not to overload the screenplay with dialogue, so that the more powerful element of visualization won’t be lost.

The scriptwriter must all remember that he is neither the cameraman nor the director. He must be careful not to include an overabundance of instructions as to how shots should be filmed. If he feels that a specific shot calls for a close-up for maximum effect, or that the camera should dolly along with a running actor, or that a dissolve is needed between one shot and the next, he can write his intuitive feeling as part of the shot – but not as a regular practice all the way through the script. Unless he or she is also going to be directing the production, too many instructions will only serve to annoy the director, and chances are that the writer will find himself without a job. The screenwriter has his task, which should be fulfilled in a professional manner without encroaching on the turf of the director, actors, or editor.

There are other technical details of screenwriting, but rather than overweighing the reader with long, dry explanations, we shall present an example scene or two of a script, based on the famous Rabbi Akiva tale, whose theme comes to teach us that everything the Almighty does is for the best.

SCRIPT FORMAT

[Note: EXT. means Exterior, and INT. means Interior. This delineation helps the people involved in the filming to plan the production.]

1. EXT. COUNTRY DIRT ROAD. DAY

CLOSE-UP on a donkey's hooves as it makes its way along the dusty path. The CAMERA PULLS BACK to reveal a rooster inside a wooden cage dangling from the back of the donkey.

CUT TO:

A DIFFERENT ANGLE

RABBI AKIVA rides on the donkey along the path through the woods. He has the appearance of a holy sage, with a long beard and happy, radiant expression. He wears a long robe and his head is covered by a Jewish turban of the period of the Mishna in the Land of Israel. He holds a book in his hand and reads, trustingly allowing the donkey to find the way.

RABBI AKIVA (reading aloud)
A Song of David, the L-rd is my shepherd,
I shall not be in want....

DISSOLVE TO:

2. EXT. HILLTOP. SUNSET

LONG SHOT. Rabbi Akiva rides on the donkey, silhouetted along the ridge of a hilltop as the sun sets in a glow of glorious colors. He continues to read Tehillim.

VOICE OF RABBI AKIVA
He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High abides
under the protection of the Almighty. I say of the L-rd:
He is my fortress, my G-d in whom I trust....

DISSOLVE TO:

3. EXT. OUTSIDE A WALLED VILLAGE. NIGHTFALL

Rabbi Akiva walks in front of the donkey, leading it toward the village, just as the GATEKEEPER begins to shut the village gate for the night.

CLOSE-UP on Rabbi Akiva who looks happy at having found a place to lodge.

WIDER ANGLE. Rabbi Akiva approaches the Gatekeeper as he swings the gate closed.

RABBI AKIVA
May peace be unto you, honored friend.

The Gatekeeper ignores Rabbi Akiva and continues to close the tall gate.

RABBI AKIVA
Perhaps I can find lodging in the village
this evening?

Without answering, the Gatekeeper swings the gate shut and disappears from view behind the village wall.

CLOSE-UP on Rabbi Akiva. He continues to smile just as before.

RABBI AKIVA
Everything the Almighty does is for the best.

To be continued....

With this beginning, the reader is invited to finish writing the story in screenplay format. If you are not familiar with the tale, you can probably locate it on the Internet if you search for tales of Rabbi Akiva, or in Tractate Berachot of the Talmud, page 60B.

Remember, don't be long-winded in your descriptions, and don't overload the script with camera instructions and notes for the director. Simply describe the visuals, actions, and dialogue in a clear and concise fashion.

Hatzlacha!

SAMPLE SHORT STORY

In an earlier chapter, we noted that a theme can inspire the writing of a story. Sometimes, the writer starts with a message or idea that he or she wants to communicate. After a writer knows what he wants to say, the right storyline is needed to bring the message across. In the story, “Ehud,” I searched for a metaphor which would explain Rabbi Kook’s teaching that the Land of Israel is not something peripheral to the Jewish People and to Torah, but rather an intrinsic, indivisible foundation of both, united in a holy, marital-like bond.

After reading the story “Ehud,” try answering the questions which follow, as a reminder and miniature, self-study review of the main points covered in this book.

In the final chapter, you will find a series of writing exercises designed to get you writing on your own. While some people enjoy writing novels and others prefer writing screenplays, it is a good idea to start out your literary career by mastering the art of short story writing. In doing so, you will learn all of the techniques of the craft, and also internalize the very important lesson of being concise and keeping to the point of your story. Plus, a short story can be written in a day, so will get to see immediate results and be able to garner a lot of writing experience in a short amount of time. Don’t forget that feedback is a key to improvement, so don’t be afraid to show your inchoate efforts to friends. And don’t be afraid to rewrite, if need be, over and over again, until all the elements of your story flow so smoothly that the reader can’t wait to turn the next page.

Hatzlacha! Success!

EHUD

Ehud was a happy man, truly content with his lot. He had a lovely wife, three lovely children, and a lovely house in Ramat Gan. He had a good job and good friends. He liked and respected all people, and all people liked and respected him. He was friendly, optimistic, and always tried to see the good side of things, believing that everything that happened in life was for the best. He did whatever he could to help people, and he avoided quarrels and fights, believing that peace was life's most precious value. He was a smart man, an educated man, but humble, never thinking he was better than anyone else. He had his opinions, but he respected all points of view, except for the radical. He kept to the middle path in life and followed the rule, "Do unto others what you would have them do unto you." He wasn't a religious man, practicing rituals and the like, but he lived a very moral, principled life.

One quiet evening, while Ehud was reading his newspaper, there was a knock on the door. A man stood outside. He was a tall man, a big man, with a nondescript face. He might have been a Gentile, or an Arab, or a Jew.

Ehud greeted him with a smile and a pleasant hello. The man seemed surprised that Ehud didn't recognize him.

"The other day in town, I lent you twenty shekels," he said.

Ehud didn't remember. He thought and thought, but he couldn't remember a thing. It wasn't like him to forget, but the man seemed quite certain. It wouldn't be polite to argue, Ehud thought. It was only twenty shekels. And apparently he had given the man his address. Ehud apologized for forgetting, gave the man twenty shekels, and said goodnight.

The very next night, he returned. The same man. He appeared at the door while Ehud's wife, Tzipora, was cooking dinner in the kitchen.

"I came for my television," the man said.

"Your television?" Ehud asked.

"The television set that I lent you," the man said. "I want it back. My children don't have a TV to watch."

"What will my children watch?" Ehud asked.

"I'm sorry, but that isn't my problem," the man replied.

"But the television is mine," Ehud protested. "I bought it, and I have a warranty to prove it too."

Ehud walked to the cabinet where he kept all of his papers in alphabetically arranged files. But the television warranty wasn't there. He searched through his old bank statements, phone bills and medical records, but the warranty

was nowhere to be found. Embarrassed, he returned to the door.

“For the moment, I can’t seem to find it,” he said.

“That proves it then,” the man said. “I’m sorry, but I don’t have much time, and I really don’t want to fight. Please give it to me now.”

Ehud didn’t want to fight either. For one thing, the man was bigger than he was, and more principally, Ehud didn’t like fighting. Fighting was barbaric. Fighting was cruel. Perhaps the man was too embarrassed to admit he was poor. And maybe the man’s children really didn’t have a TV to watch. If so, the situation truly wasn’t fair. After all, Ehud’s children watched every night. It was, Ehud finally decided, the right thing to do. So he walked to the den, pulled out the television plug from the wall, and to the cries of his startled children, he carried the set to the front door and handed it to the man, feeling in his heart that he was doing something noble, something majestic, something good.

When the man left. Ehud sat down with his unhappy children to explain why it was so important to have done what he did. Everyone in the world was equal, he told them, and it was important for everyone to share all alike. When there were differences between people, there was envy, and envy led to fighting, and fighting brought an end to peace. Just as they had enjoyed watching television, so would some other children now. Ehud’s wife stood listening in the doorway, a soft smile on her lips. This was the reason she loved her husband so much. He was so caring, so open-hearted, so good. More important than the television was the example her husband was setting for the children, and the valuable lesson they would learn.

“But what will we do now?” the older boy asked.

“Read,” Ehud said. “From now on, I’ll read you books.”

The very next evening, Ehud sat in his armchair, reading a book to his children, almost awaiting a knock on the door. When it came, he sprang up and hurried across the room.

“Good evening,” the man said. “I came for my clothes.”

For a moment, the two men stared at each other. Ehud sensed his wife and his children behind him, watching to see what would happen.

“They are upstairs in the closet,” Ehud said.

He invited the man inside. He felt he was being tested. To see if he could really practice what he believed; that all men were brothers; that everyone was equal; that his claims on the world were the same as all other peoples, without firsts or seconds, better or worse.

Ehud led the man upstairs to his bedroom. Maybe, he reasoned, the man really didn’t have any clothes besides the same very nice suit he wore every night. Maybe he had no job, and no money to buy what he needed. Ehud

opened his closet, took out his clothes, and spread them out on the bed: pants and shirts, sweaters and jackets and shoes.

“A suitcase would help,” the man said.

Ehud gave him two. The man filled them both. Ehud wasn't worried. He was glad. He had a job. He could always buy more clothes. And even with all the man took, Ehud still had more than he needed. Magnanimously, Ehud helped him carry the suitcases downstairs. With smiles on their faces, Ehud, his wife, and his children said goodnight to the man at the door.

The next night, the children were waiting at the windows, but the man didn't come.

“Where is he, Dad?” one son asked

“I don't know,” Ehud answered.

“I wish he would come,” the girl said. “I like him. I think that he's fun.”

His wife also seemed disappointed. She had even prepared something for the visitor to eat. Ehud felt glad that they all liked the man, but when the man didn't come, he felt unquestionably relieved.

But the very next day he was back.

“He's coming! He's coming!” the boy called from his post at the window. The little girl ran to the door. Ehud greeted him with a cordial hello.

“I've come for my house,” the man said. “My family wants to move back tonight.”

Ehud's voice stuck in his throat. He felt dizzy. He felt weak. Giving up his house was too much.

“He wants to take our whole house, Mommy!” the little girl yelled, running to tell her mother.

Ehud felt his sons' eyes upon him, watching to see what he would do.

“It isn't your house,” Ehud said.

“Yes it is,” the man answered.

“We bought it. We have a deed,” Ehud insisted.

“I have a deed too,” the man answered, and he reached in his pocket and pulled out a deed. “The people you bought the house from weren't the legal owners. I lived here before with my family and have the original lien.”

How could it be, Ehud thought? Hadn't he received the house from its original owners? Quickly, he examined the man's deed. Superficially, it seemed all in order; including the right address and plot number, the name of the builder, the seal of the notary, and signatures of lawyers and witnesses. Once again, Ehud felt faint. Little white dots swirled in his brain. The man had to help him into a chair.

“I'll bring you some water,” Tzipora said.

She returned with two glasses and offered one to the man.

“The deed seems all in order,” Ehud said. “But I'm not a lawyer. Of course, on something like this, I'll have to have legal advice.”

“I really don't care for lawyers,” the man said. “I'd much prefer to solve this ourselves. Lawyers always get ugly, and I really don't want to fight.”

“Of course we don't want to fight,” Tzipora said. “But...”

“I'll handle this,” Ehud said. He stood up from his chair and told his children to go up to their room.

“We want to listen,” his older boy said.

“Let's give him the house. Dad,” the younger added. “We can all live outside in my tent.”

Ehud looked at his wife.

“We could go to my mother's,” she said.

His wife really meant what she said. Ehud's heart moved toward her with a surging of love. She was so beautiful. She was so pure. He remembered how happy he had been on their wedding day to have found a partner who believed in all the principles that he cherished.

It was true, Ehud reasoned. They could go to her mother. It wasn't as if they would be out on the street. And maybe the man didn't have his own home or anywhere to live. And it was also true that lawyers could get ugly. And it was only a house. There were other houses. What did it matter where they lived? It was only walls, floors, and furniture. The main thing was that everyone should live somewhere and that there shouldn't be a fight.

Ehud reached into his pocket. With trembling fingers, he handed over his key. In the morning, he would decide what to do about lawyers. Now the important thing was for his children to learn the great lesson of kindness and fairness and peace.

He told his family to gather what they needed for the night. He collected his important papers, including his mortgage and deed to the house, a change of clothes for work, pajamas, his toothbrush, and the small handgun in his bedside table, which he was afraid to leave in the house lest the man's children find it. He handed the man his mother-in-law's phone number in case he had any problems. Then, carrying two small bags, he led his wife and his children out from their home.

The next day, Ehud was typically busy at the office. He spoke to his lawyer, but there was nothing to do on the phone, except to schedule an appointment for some time later in the week. For the moment, Ehud decided not to go to the police.

Life at his mother-in-law's apartment was crowded, but the elderly woman seemed happy with the unexpected visit. That evening, Ehud was trying to distract himself with the newspaper when he heard a familiar knock on his

mother-in-law's door. Tzipora glanced up from the television. Husband and wife exchanged looks.

“He's back!” the girl said, running to open the door.

Tonight, the man was dressed in one of Ehud's nicest suits. He stood in the doorway and said with a big happy smile.

“I've come for my wife.”

His wife? Had Ehud heard right? Tzipora?

Slowly, Ehud stood up. Again he felt dizzy. Again he felt weak. His mind struggled to reason. Of course every man deserved a wife. But Tzipora was his wife.

“But I married her,” Ehud said.

“I married her too,” the man answered.

“I have a ketuba to prove it,” Ehud argued.

“So do I,” said the man.

“Her ring,” Ehud gasped.

“Anyone can buy a ring.”

“But we have pictures from the wedding.”

“Pictures can be faked.”

“Our children,” Ehud said. “What about our children?”

“The children are mine,” the man answered.

Ehud trembled. He was speechless. He was afraid to talk, afraid to reason. He would say white, and the man would say black. He would say up, and the man would say down. Both things were true. But his wife. He looked at his wife. His beautiful wife. She too was silent. She too was confused. Why belong to one man? Why not belong to two? Why should she be Ehud's wife and not someone else's? All people were the same, weren't they? And weren't all men brothers?

“I'm afraid I don't have much time,” the man said. “Are you coming, Tzipora?”

Ehud looked at his wife. He knew she was his. More than that. She was him. He didn't need a deed or a document to prove it. She was like a piece of his body. She was like his heart. Would he give the man his heart? That was what the man wanted. He was demanding that Ehud give up his heart. Ehud grasped the gun in his pocket. Slowly he raised it into the air. He intended to point the gun at the man, but he couldn't. Instead, he pointed it at himself. He closed his eyes, and he fired.

That was the lesson that Ehud taught his children that night.

Review Questions

Based on the short story "Ehud"

1. What is one of the themes of the story?
2. Can you think of some others?
3. What is the goal of the visitor?
4. What is Ehud's goal?
5. List a few of the factors that motivate Ehud's behavior.
6. How would you characterize Ehud, and how are his qualities portrayed in the story?
7. What is the main story problem?
8. How is conflict achieved in the story?
9. What function does Ehud's wife and children play in the story?
10. How is suspense built up in the story?
11. What complications arise during the course of the story?
12. What is the story's climax?
13. What does the reader learn from the outcome of the story?

Story Writing Exercises

1. Think of an idea for a story. Write a sentence that expresses the idea. For instance, “This is a story about the Golem of Prague.”
2. What is the theme or message of the story? Write a sentence that defines the theme. For instance, “The theme of my story about the Golem of Prague is that Hashem has many ways to help save the Jewish People from its enemies.”
3. Chose one of the main characters in the story and write a one or two page biography describing him or her, with personal details and a list of likes and dislikes.
4. Write a page describing the setting and background of the story. For instance, if you are writing about the Golem of Prague, write a page description of the Jewish community of Prague during that historical period.
5. Think about possible beginnings for your story. Chose one and briefly explain why you chose to start there?
6. Define the story problem in simple terms, stating what the main character wants. For instance, if you are writing about the Golem of Prague, the story problem might be: “When the Jews of Prague are persecuted by cruel anti-Semitism, the great Rabbi, the Maharal of Prague, seeks a solution to save them.”
7. Write a short, general synopsis of your story, as if you were telling the story to a friend, describing the things that take place, and the ending.
8. Write a more detailed outline of the events in the story, expanding on key events.
9. Start to write. When you finish your story, show it to a teacher or friend for their feedback.
10. Put the story aside for a few days, then read it and begin to rewrite, making changes that will help the narrative flow in the clearest and most effective manner.
11. Even now that you have finished rewriting the story, it’s good to get more feedback. Make any added changes, striving to do the best job you can.