At the conclusion of the Fall Feasts, the Jewish High Holy Days, is the feast of Simchat Torah (“Rejoicing in the Law”). Traditional and Orthodox Jews passionately celebrate the gift of God’s Word. To witness the exuberant dancing and singing while carrying the adorned Torah Scroll at the Western Wall in Jerusalem shames the paltry expression of devotion to the Word that characterizes most of us late moderns.

Yet it is clear that the Word of God is in three forms: 1) The Living Word (the Memra in Hebrew; or Logos in Greek), 2) The Written Word (the final authority and judge for all faith and life), and 3) The Oralized Word (Scripture brought to life through human communicators). This article will highlight the vital role of the Oralized Word, and especially for our moment in history, and in Jewish ministry.

The Jewish Roots of Orality and Storytelling

The Hebraic roots of storytelling pre-date the Written Torah by many centuries. The great stories of Adam and Eve, of Cain and Abel, of Noah and his family, of the Tower of Babel, the stories of the families of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph were transmitted orally over generations by good storytellers before ever they were written in the Torah.

Moses taught the people of Israel that when they came into the Land promised to them, they were to bring the first fruits (a tithe) of their produce in a basket to the place God designated. They were to offer it to the priest, who would set it before the altar. But then this striking practice is commanded,

"And you shall make response before the Lord your God, and say, A wandering Aramean was my father. And he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number, and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us and laid on us hard labor. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great deeds of terror, with signs and wonders. And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey."

—Deuteronomy 26:5-9 ESV

Note from the bolding above that this was an oral act and a community event. The people are commanded to annually recite, to tell the story of father Abraham, of his family’s decent into Egypt and then of the great deliverance that forged the Israelite peoplehood.

Thus, to the present time, each year at Passover the Jewish people are commanded to tell their children the story of the nation’s founding, of God’s awesome deliverance from Egypt. “And you shall tell your son on that day…” (Exodus 13:8). The Hebrew verb is “gadd ata” — to tell. Hence the Passover event and the “Haggadah” is the oral “telling” and annual retelling of the story that establishes and reinforces the Jewish people’s identity. Each Jewish holiday provides another opportunity to tell of God’s acts toward the people.

Prior to the invention of movable type printing (Gutenberg, 1437), books were rare and expensive; readers were rare. Reading was an oral act and a community event. People did not read to themselves. They listened as someone read aloud. (See Deuteronomy 31:9-13; Nehemiah 9:3, 1 Timothy 4:13).

Printing presses changed all that. As Eugene Peterson observed, “A thoroughgoing orality in which the word held people in a listening community gave way to discrete individuals silently reading books alone. Widespread literacy ‘changed the act of reading from an oral-aural community event into a silent-passive visual exercise’” (William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids: 1987:91).

Though holistic, the Hebraic tradition involves the hearing ear more than the distancing eye. Biblically, we see God always speaking personally to His people, not writing to them. The Shema reads, “Hear, O Israel…” not “Read, O Israel….” Rarely in Scripture do God or Jesus write anything: The Ten Commandments, the handwriting on the wall in Daniel, and Jesus writing in the sand in front of the woman caught in adultery. Yet the phrase, “Thus says the LORD” is repeated over 400 times. When the apostle John sent the letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor, he instructed, “Blessed is he who reads aloud the...
words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear" (Rev. 1:3).

Reading the Scriptures is not the same as listening to God. To do the former is not necessarily to do the latter. Atheists can read Scripture. Note from the TABLE below the contrast between reading and oral-aural hearing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Listening</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eyes</td>
<td>Ears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read marks on a page</td>
<td>Attend to the sound of a voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A lone person with a book, written by someone miles away, or dead, or both.</td>
<td>An interpersonal, relational act.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The book is at the reader’s mercy. The book does not know if I am paying attention or not.</td>
<td>Listener is required to be attentive to the speaker, at speaker’s mercy. The speaker knows if I am paying attention or not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reader initiates the process; the reader is in charge.</td>
<td>The speaker initiates the process; the speaker is in charge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Storytelling has always been part of the Jewish tradition. The Aggadah is a part of Judaism’s Oral Law in the classical rabbinic literature of Judaism. Talmudic tractates, the Halachic rulings and mitzvot are legal and propositional in form. In contrast the Agadic and Midrashic tradition is largely in narrative form, or simply put: stories (historical anecdotes, parables, homilies, folklore).

According to well-received Jewish tradition, it was King Solomon who, if not invented, popularized the parable. “The Torah until Solomon’s time,” commented Rabbi Nachman in the Agada, “was comparable to a labyrinth with a bewildering number of rooms. Once one entered there, one lost his way out. Then along came Solomon and invented the parable that has served as a ball of thread. When tied at the entrance to this labyrinth, it serves as a secure guide through all the winding, bewildering passages” (Ausubel: 1948:56).

As the well-known maxim has it—“History is His Story.” God’s Master Story is the “Ariadne’s thread” (drawing from the Greek story here, as the rabbi did) that runs through the whole Bible. The Master Story begins in Genesis with Creation and covenant. Genesis 3:15 is the first announcement of the Master Story that finds fulfillment in Messiah. Genesis 12:1-3 makes the story more specific—the plan of redemption will follow the historic thread of Abraham’s descendants. At the end of the thread, we see Messiah Yeshua establishes His Kingdom and puts everything to rights. This metanarrative is the frame into which all the smaller stories fit. It also provides a hermeneutical key for interpreting other genre of Scripture, using the touchstone question: How does it follow the thread of God’s Master Story?

Taking up the thought, Rabbi Nachman’s colleague, Rabbi Hanina said: “Until the time of Solomon the Torah could have been compared to a well full of refreshing water, but because of its extraordinary depth no one could get to the bottom. What was necessary was to find a rope long enough to tie to the bucket in order to bring up the water. Solomon made up this rope with his parables and thus enables everyone to reach to the profoundest depths of the well” (Ausubel: 1948:56).

Modern Western preachers and teachers often think of stories as mere illustrations or “icing on the cake.” They think the real cake, or the substance is the more abstract, propositional truth in logical, linear, statement-of-fact form. Rabbi Hanina knew that stories were the rope that reaches to the profoundest depths of the well.

As N.T. Wright has written, “Human life, then, can be seen as grounded in and constituted by the implicit or explicit stories which humans tell themselves and one another. … Stories are often regarded as a poor man’s substitute for the ‘real thing,’ which is to be found in some abstract truth, or statements about ‘bare facts.’” (The New Testament and the People of God, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992:38).

The Power of Story

Every person’s life is a story with plot twists and interesting characters. We learn vicariously through the truths we draw from a story that features real life situations similar to our own. A story can penetrate our imagination, conscience and emotions, touching us at a deep personal level.

Rabbi Jacob ben Wolf Kranz of Dubno, the “Dubner Maggid,” was a Lithuanian-born preacher who lived from 1740 to 1804. Maggid is Hebrew for storyteller (from the same Hebrew root as “Aggadah” and “Haggadah”). A contemporary of the Vilna Gaon, the “Maggid” was famous for explaining Torah concepts by using a mashal or parable. He was once asked, “Why are stories so powerful?” His legendary reply was to tell the following story (below a modern re-telling):

There was once a poor old woman...she was well...ugly...very ugly...she had a bent back and hooked nose, her chin was covered with warps and pimples...her eyes bugged out, her mouth was crooked and her teeth broken. She dressed in old rags that smelled. No one would listen to what she said or even look at her. If they saw her they would run away...slam doors in her face. So she was very sad because all she wished to do was talk to her. As N.T. Wright has written, “Human life, then, can be seen as grounded in and constituted by the implicit or explicit stories which humans tell themselves and one another. … Stories are often regarded as a poor man’s substitute for the ‘real thing,’ which is to be found in some abstract truth, or statements about ‘bare facts.’” (The New Testament and the People of God, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992:38).

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

And it worked out so well that their arrangement lasts to this very day. That is why to this very day the truth always hides behind a good story. 3

What follows is a biblical example of truth hiding behind a good story. Imagine, had Nathan the prophet approached King David after his sin with Bathsheba and told him the abstracted truth, “You have committed adultery and murder, O King,” would the King have readily received this truth? Likely not. He may have hid himself of this troublesome prophet. He did not want to hear the ugly, naked truth. But instead of presenting him with the truth, Nathan told him a story,

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

—2 Samuel 12:1-4 ESV

This story opened a window for David to vividly see the injustice. He became enraged and declared, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” Nathan said, “You are the man!” Nathan had opened a window, which became a mirror to David. Herein is the power of story to bring truth home. Suddenly, it is easy to see why about 70 percent of the Bible is in narrative form, with about 15 percent poetry and only about 10 percent in propositional (didactic epistolary material, laws) form.

Yeshua the Messiah, the Master Teacher, Was a Storyteller

Yeshua was the Master Teacher and Communicator of all time. In His wisdom, He understood the power of story to teach, to impact and change lives: Jesus always used stories and illustrations when speaking to the crowds. In fact, He never spoke to them without using such parables” (Matthew 13:34 NIV). He adapted and chose his stories carefully in order to meet the felt needs of the am ha arets (the common people of the land). And He knew how to deliver truth to the religious people—truth they needed, but did not want to hear, and would not hear unless it was wrapped in a story. He was an expert in using dialogue and questions in order to engage His audience and gain a response.

Often we think that stories are for the illiterate and uneducated. But Yeshua used stories with the common, uneducated folk, as well as with the most literate and learned of His day, the Pharisees.

A Storytelling Revival

Those in the evangelical foreign missions movement have been using chronological Bible storytelling for years in reaching non-literature peoples, who are oral learners. Expositional presentations (abstract lectures, outlines, steps, lists) are formidable obstacles to them. They have learned to learn differently, through story. Often it was assumed that storytelling was only for primary oral cultures. However, the postmodern turn in Western Culture is driving a storytelling revival here in America and in other Western countries.

The advent of television, movies, and now the digital age, has brought changes in our learning style preferences. The majority of the millennials, the baby busters/Gen-Xers, and even many baby boomers now prefer to learn through spoken and visual means rather than through the printed word. We have been conditioned to be more visual and oral by our iPhones, iPods, YouTube, and the social networking media like Facebook.

This new learning style by literate people who prefer to get their information by visual and oral means is called “secondary orality.” They are adopting orality as their preferred communication style. This phenomenon is also called “post-literacy.” We may be rightly disconcerted about the loss of literacy in America, but this turn also offers opportunities. Oral cultures have always been characterized by relational face-to-face communication using stories, proverbs, songs, chants, drama, poetry, and other forms of communal and interactive events. Western literate people are hungering for these elements in an increasing way. When a wave like this arises in our culture, we who
advance Messiah’s mission should get out our “surfboards” and ride it for Kingdom purposes.

This shift in learning and communication styles challenges us to communication strategies that meet people “where they are.” There is a new receptivity to the stories of God... if we can tell them effectively. So often the great stories of Scripture are read from pulpits as if it was a lecture being read by someone other than the author. Stories told with emotion and appropriate inflections and gestures impact the memory. Most people remember the story that was told as an “illustration” in last week’s sermon better than they remember the three points of the en dulge sermon.

There is a growing “Orality Movement” in the evangelical world, seeking to address this situation.4

Effective Jewish Ministry Through Storying

We have discussed how storytelling has always been part of Jewish tradition. We have discussed the power of story, and how 70 percent of the Bible is in story form. We have discussed “secondary orality” and the new receptivity to story in Western Culture. So what of its use in Jewish ministry today? Jewish people are generally highly literate, well educated. As a long-time missionary to Jewish people, when I heard of the storying approach, I sensed immediately that storying would be Jewish-friendly, if using the stories of the Hebrew Scriptures (the “Old Testament”). Surely the People of the Book will be People of the Story. The majority of Jewish people today are secularized and, though generally highly literate, they are not very biblically literate. Yet they instinctively know these are the stories of the Jewish people, the stories of Israel. They resonate with them.

Storying is Jewish-friendly. The Jewish tradition of storytelling has continued on the present day, surviving the scorching last few centuries of modernity. Note this network of Jewish storytellers as an “illustration” in last week’s sermon better than they remember the three points of the end dulge sermon.

By storying, we mean the entire process of the oral and visual communication of a Bible story followed by group discussion, interpretation, application, accountability, drama and/or song and the retelling of the story such that the story is internalized by the group and can be retold to others.

Storying is seeker-friendly. People of any faith or none can participate and not feel preached to, or lectured at. Anyone can hear and discuss the story. Seekers feel on a more level playing field, because everyone in the group is discussing the story just told. All are looking for the treasures in the story together. Then the story does its work of speaking to hearts.

Another advantage of storying is that it bypasses the pitfalls of apologistics and argumentation that goes nowhere. Jewish people, and especially those schooled in rabbinic thought, can argue and debate you to a standpoint over the Messiah’s identity and other theological issues. Head-to-head Messianic vs. rabbinic apologistics is the naked-truth approach. Reflecting upon a story and keeping the group focused on drawing out its treasures shift the matter to a whole different dimension. We let the story do the work of speaking to hearts, rather than trying to convince the defensive rationalist mind.

The Holy Spirit is our internal Teacher, who promised to guide us into all truth (John 14:26; 16:13; 1 Corinthians 2:9-16). Storying acknowledges the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit through power of the Word of God and theology is embedded within every biblical story. The Holy Spirit applies the truths most relevant to the life needs of every hearer as the telling and discussion transpire.

Traditional schooling models have been teacher-dependent, with the students too passive. The teacher breaks down the Bible text into digestible form, and the student mechanically records the bits on paper, like a mother bird would feed a baby bird. Reflecting upon a Bible story in a group setting and drawing out its treasures actively engages people so the learning reaches the heart and sticks.

I have been using storying in a weekly Jewish Seeker’s Study for about two years now in the Los Angeles area. Between 20 and 30 attend each week, and about one-third of them are Jewish. We have storied our way from Exodus through to 1 Samuel, the marvelous David stories. A Jewish believer led the story of David and Goliath last week, bringing his young son to play David, with football shoulder pads as Saul’s armor. His dad used Aragorn’s sword, Lord of the Rings commemorative edition, as he played the Philistine champion. While humorous and fun, we also seriously discussed honor and shame, victory, faith, and courage, and applications to facing our own “Goliaths.”

Storying provides a context for discipleship as well as leadership training. I have been coaching Jewish believers to lead the storytelling, and they are growing in leadership skills as they do so.

One Jewish man embraced Yeshua as his Messiah through our group several months ago. Several Jewish seekers have attended, and three or four have continued to come for months. They have not yet embraced the Messiah, but they are participating in the stories and binding to the group.

Let’s verbalize the Word, and bring these stories to life from the dead page in our day! Yeshua the Messiah said to those who revered the Book, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). The purpose of the Book of the LORD is to know the LORD of the Book. The Written Word points beyond itself to the Living Word.

Let’s revive the truth that the People of the Book are also the People of the Story!

1 A wonderful resource for traditional Jewish stories is “A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People,” edited by Nathan Ausubel, New York: Crown Publisher’s, Inc., 1948.

2 Sociologists concerned with the postmodern shift describe our times as being characterized by “incredulity to metanarratives.” (Lyotard, Jean-Francois, “The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge” 1979, English translation, University of Minnesota Press, 1984). A metanarrative is a master story. The grand metanarratives that have driven modernity— progress and the Perfectibility of Man through Science, Industrialism, Communism, Fascism, and other “isms”—have largely become “wams” at the turn of the 21st century; they have lost their compelling power, no longer holding the same credibil ity. Thus, the Western world is searching for a new metanarrative. There is a receptive climate in which for us to communicate God’s Master Story.


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