

STORYING NEW BEGINNINGS

Cherie Karo Schwartz

SESSION SUMMARY

The holidays of *Tishrei* are filled with story and spirit. We will cultivate the use of storytelling, improvisation, and story study with personal and modern connection. The session explored folklore, sacred, personal, and original tales to help guide and enhance teaching of the Fall holidays with classes from middle school through adults, as well as for intergenerational and organizational groups.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cherie Karo Schwartz is a storyteller, author and educator from Denver. Author of three books, stories, poetry, and numerous articles, Cherie does performances, workshops, *Shabbatonim*, and special programs for Jewish schools, museums, libraries, organizations, and congregations for all ages and interests, creating unique programs for each occasion, *simcha*, life cycle event, and holiday. She has grown with CAJE/ NewCAJE for three decades, and is on faculty for Jewish Spiritual Education ordination.

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Our Jewish year is filled with circles, cycles, and spirals. Here are some story materials that can be used for teaching about the holidays of *Tishrei*. Story is at the center of our Jewish world; we are the People of the Story. Using stories can help us understand and teach more deeply the values of the time of *heshbon hanefesh*.

STORY: “WHEN IS IT MORNING?” A Talmudic Story (synopsis by Cherie Karo Schwartz)

“When has the morning come?” asked the Rebbe’s students. “When can we really tell that the day has dawned? Is it when you can tell a black thread from a blue thread? When you can distinguish black from white cows? When you can see the sun rise?”

The Rebbe pondered their questions and slowly responded: “When one person can look into another’s eyes and see a brother or a sister, when we can truly look into another’s eyes and see someone else as we would like to be seen, then the day has certainly dawned; the morning will have come.”

ACTIVITY: How do we help create a new day at Rosh Hashanah?

STORY: “LARGE AND SMALL STONES”

(A much abbreviated version of a Syrian folktale in *Seventy and One Tales for the Jewish Year*, by Eliezer Marcus and Barbara Rush).

Two women went to the Rabbi before *Rosh Hashanah*. The first woman told the Rabbi of all of her sins and her wish to repent. The second quietly stood by as the Rabbi talked with her. When he asked her why she had come, she said she came in support of her friend, but had no really big sins, just a few small ones.

The Rabbi asked them both to go into the garden. The first woman was to bring back a large stone to represent her large sin. The other woman was to bring back many small stones, like her small sins. They returned soon to the Rabbi. He looked at the stones, then told them to replace the stones exactly where they had found them.

The first woman could see the impression in the ground from her large stone and replaced it. The second woman looked and looked, but could not find the places for her many small stones.

They returned again to the rabbi who told them, “The large stone was easy to replace. *Teshuvah*, return and correction, can be made. But for the many stones, the small sins we may not even remember and do nothing about, those stones can never be replaced in their original places. How can we make *tikkun*, repair for them? By making sure that we are correcting, rebalancing, repairing as we go through the challenges. Only then can there be repair.”

STORY FROM PESITKA RABBATAI:

A king had a son who had gone astray for 100 days. His friends said to him to return to his father. He said he could not. So the father sent him a note: “Come as far as you can, and I will return to you.”

ACTIVITY: How can we effect Teshuvah at Tishrei? How to bring in to New Year?

THE SHOFAR OF RETURN

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High on the mount of Moriah, alone with God, our ancestor Abraham was willing to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac, at God’s command. And yet at that pivotal moment, Abraham’s hand was stayed.¹ Our sages say that God called out to Abraham at this *Akedah*, saying that a ram would be the substitute for Isaac, and that he should let the *shofar* call. When Abraham asked, “What is *shofar*?” God told him of the ram’s horn, and of a ram caught in a nearby thicket.²

And so, honoring the memory, we have a *shofar*, made from the horn of a ram: a horn blown to awaken, to announce, to affirm.

For the person blowing the shofar, all of the energy and breath is gathered into the moment of the sound. And, too, we listeners are entirely focused: we stand together, we hold our breath, we gather in, we await the trill of the *shofar*.

And so, the sound begins with all of us, and when it is blown with full intention, the call goes through the horn and emerges into the world. Loudly it proclaims to us to stop and listen and feel the sound of *shofar*, our ancient cry.

Each sound of *shofar* draws our attention by its own merit. First there is a whole sound of *tekiah*, then it is split into three by *shevarim*, and then it is broken into bits by *teruah*. Finally, when it seems all is lost, the sound comes round and whole again by the final *tekiah gedolah*.³ And so we can learn: even if we are shattered, we can still hear, in faith, and once again be whole. We can return in peace.

Yet, why is there only one horn, if a ram indeed has two horns on its head?

Perhaps only one ram’s horn is meant to be sounded out loud, and the other has its own story.

Listen.

Let the sound of the *shofar* come forth.

Hear the ram’s horn cry.

Stop, be still, and listen.

True, the sound goes forth from the *shofar* and into the world. We long to hear it; it resonates within our very being.

The *ba’al tekiah*, the one who sounds the *shofar*, first gathers in personal and communal deep intention, the fullness of breath.

And all the while, the other ram’s horn, the one invisible to the eye but felt with the heart, is listening. It takes all of the sounds of the outside world into the larger end of the horn, bringing the moment into clear focus. The one holding the *shofar*, together with the unseen ram’s horn, gather in all that is needed before the sound can emerge.

Finally, the silence is elevated, ready. The first clear sound is heard, coming out into the world, where it wends its way down and around into our very being. And this is where it echoes in our soul.

And so, we experience the wholeness of both horns of the ram: the one that brings in the joy, pain, expectation, and love of the world, and the one that proclaims it for all to hear.

The *shofar* becomes our teacher in its clear message of *tikkun* (repair), *teshuvah* (return), *tikvah* (hope) and *shalom* (peace) for the world, for each other, and for ourselves.

Listen; hear the sounds deeply.

Take them to heart,

and help bring them back into the world.

Sources:

1. Story of Abraham and Isaac in *Torah: Genesis 22*; ram in the thicket: *Genesis 22:13*
2. Pirke de Rebbe Eliezer, 31
3. from Arthur Green, in the name of Rabbi Israel Horowitz

SOME CREATIVE DRAMA AND IMPROV FOR *TISHREI* HOLIDAYS

Created by Cherie Karo Schwartz

THE APPLE STORY

(traditional; could be Chinese in origin; one of Peninnah Schram's signature stories; this is my turning of the story)

A little apple tree lived in a forest of oak trees. Each night when he looked up through the branches of the oak trees, it looked like there were stars on their branches, and the little apple tree kept asking and asking for stars on its branches. All that it heard was the wind through the trees. The little apple tree paid no attention to its own fragrant blossoms shaped like stars, because they fell. It did not pay attention to the little green buds that appeared, even after they grew big and red and delicious apples grew. Everyone who went through the forest loved the tasty apples. Oak trees have only inedible acorns!

Yet the little apple tree only wanted stars on its branches. Finally, it demanded stars. The wind blew fiercely and blew the biggest, reddest apple from high in its branches, and broke it in half on the ground. The little apple tree would not look down, even though a whisper told to look deep inside. Finally when it really looked, there, in the middle of each half of its apple was a beautiful star. It was there all the time. We just have to turn our way of thinking to find a star within ourselves.

ACTIVITIES:

Younger: Have them draw the apple with star and draw what kinds of stars they have inside: their gifts and talents.

Older: Write a story in the shape of a star, highlighting their own gifts, hidden strengths, and abilities. Who helps them find their stars? Who is a star for them? How can they bring these lessons into the New Year? How does letting our stars shine bring us a truly New Year?

STORYING AKEDAH

Whole group or small groups (late elementary through adults)

Each person either chooses or identifies with one character in the *Akedah*, whether mentioned or not; human or inanimate (Abraham, Sarah, Yitzchak, the donkey, the wood for sacrifice, Mt. Moriah, the knife, the two servants, the ram, etc.). They begin and continue conversations in first person in character. How does the story evolve? How does it change the perspective of the listener? End with a reading of the *Torah* description; you can also use *midrashim* and commentaries.

MIME TUG OF WAR

(middle school through adult)

Two sides; mime actual tug of war.

Ask the participants to talk about *heshbon ha-nefesh*: What sides are pulling you? *Yetser Tov* and *Yetser ha-Ra*?

What are some things that push or pull you in different directions?

METAPHORICAL SUKKAH

Create a virtual *sukkah* by giving names to the four posts of a *sukkah* (pillars of Judaism, *avot*, four strong people who uphold *Torah* and Judaism in the community...). Name what the walls are: What connects us and keeps us together? What is the most open of the four? Then name the *schach*: What is encompassing and yet still allows us to see the stars?

For the very young: Create a story of talking fruits and veggies waiting to be hung up with pride in the *sukkah*.

SIMCHAT TORAH

Torah can be rolled out (with proper protection for the parchment, such as gloves). At the end, paper can be added. If our story is to continue, what can we add? What continues our story as Jews, Americans, humans? What can we add? Where are we going? What is the next adventure?

SHEMINI ATZERET:

Since *Torah* is water, and we can now pray for rain water to come, what are the showerings of blessings that arrive by the time we get to the end of the cycle of holidays?

STORIES FOR ROSH HASHANA

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“Gates of Tears” in Peninnah Schram’s *Stories Within Stories: From the Jewish Oral Tradition*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, pp. 49-50.

“A Question of Balance” in Peninnah Schram’s *Jewish Stories One Generation Tells Another*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 1987, pp. 323-325.

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“The Most Precious Thing in the World” by Joan Sutton in Peninnah Schram’s *Chosen Tales: Stories Told by Jewish Storytellers*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, an Imprint of Rowman & Littlefield, 1995, pp. 371-375.

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“More Valuable Than Gold” in Daniel and Chana Sperber’s *Ten Best Jewish Children’s Stories*. Jerusalem, Israel: Pitspopany Press, 1995, pp. 28-29.

For more stories on the various themes of the High Holidays, such as charity, faith, repentance, prayer, etc., you will find references to stories, along with books where you can find these stories, in this excellent resource book: Elswit, Sharon Barcan. *The Jewish Story Finder: A Guide to 363 Tales Listing Subjects and Sources*. Foreword by Peninnah Schram. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005.

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