

## TALES FOR THE DAYS OF AWE: USING PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Susan Stone

### SESSION SUMMARY

Be ready to open your heart. What better way to prepare ourselves for contemplation, for *teshuvah*, than to enter into the story with Susan, engaging imagination, intellect, and emotions? This entertaining high school/middle school/ adult program includes stories (teachings) of *tzedakah*, *mitzvot*, justice, self-awareness, forgiveness, *tikkun olam*, and *teshuvah*: a meaningful *Selichot*. Learn how to combine your own personal narratives with traditional Jewish tales to illuminate the teachings.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Storyteller and teaching artist, Susan Stone has traveled all over the USA, and in Poland, telling Jewish tales to adults, and children: Midrash, folktales and Chasidic stories -- in schools, in synagogues, and at festivals. Her CDs have earned Parents' Choice Gold/ Storytelling World Awards. She served as adjunct faculty at National-Louis University and her stories have been included in numerous anthologies.

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#### I. TELLING OF TALES: (20 mins)

- A. Retirement Home/Dirty Pastry (*tzedaka/kavanah/mitzvot*) (Tunisian folktale)
- B. *Shmutz*/Leaf From the Garden of Eden (gratitude/self awareness) (folktale)
- C. Miss May and North and South (Chasidic—Maggid of Mezeritch)
- D. Devon Ave/*Ir Ha Moshachim* (Compassionate Awareness/*chesed*) Oral story...Adapted by Susan

#### II. WRITING REFLECTION (20 mins):

Participants will reflect on the stories told and respond with tales from their own lives .

Questions for Reflection:

- ◆ Tell about a time you did a *mitzvah* "by the letter of the law" ...What was the result? (A)
- ◆ Talk about someone you didn't appreciate enough when you knew them or before they were gone...a teacher, a rabbi, a parent, a friend. Describe where you were...what did they look like....what goodness did they have? (B)
- ◆ Tell what happened when you saw the good in someone ....or didn't. (D)
- ◆ Describe an interaction with a stranger where you saw the good (or the holy) (C or D)

#### III. BREAK THE ICE GAMES (5 mins)

#### IV. PARTICIPANTS TELL TALES IN PAIRS (15 mins)

- ◆ Find a partner and tell (don't read) your story to the other person. What story are you responding to? How can you have a transition?

#### V. VOLUNTEERS TO TELL THEIR TALES TO THE GROUP (15 mins)

#### VI. QUESTIONS/THOUGHTS (15mins)

Reflection: How did this method of combining personal narrative with traditional tales impact the telling?

To use this method of midrash you can

- ◆ Use one of your own favorite Jewish stories to stimulate thought/story in your students. Tell the story and ask important questions to help them reflect. Do not use questions that elicit a one word answer. Have them respond in writing or orally.
- ◆ Use this method to respond to a story you read by writing a personal narrative and combining the two tales.

**STORYTELLING BENEFITS:**

The telling of your own story will....

- ♦ Open the hearts of your students to you, the teacher, creating a bond (*devekut*).
- ♦ Illuminate a Jewish story that otherwise might remain obscure or enigmatic. Make it more contemporary.
- ♦ Allow your students to understand that you struggle with the issues in the story and/or you have found a *teshuvah*, a way of turning around your behavior. You are a role model.
- ♦ Make your students (listeners) curious . Why? Because all students love to know about your life!!

**SHORT BIBLIOGRAPHY OF FAVORITE ANTHOLOGIES**

Buxbaum, Yitzhak. *Storytelling and Spirituality in Judaism*

Frankel, Ellen. *The Classic Tales: 4000 Years of Jewish Lore*

Sadeh, Pinchas. *Jewish Folktales*

Schwartz, Howard. *Leaves from the Garden of Eden: One Hundred Classic Jewish Tales*

Shapiro, Rabbi Rami. *Hasidic Tales: Annotated and Explained*

Weinreich, Beatrice Silverman. *Yiddish Folktales*

**ADDENDUM:**

To the readers of this workshop handout...

Since you were not able to take this workshop, and are only reading this from a book of collected handouts, I would like to further explain. I cannot publish most of my personal stories in this format, but I would like to encourage you to do what you already do, I am sure, in sermons and/or in your teaching. That is, to use our oral tradition as a springboard for your own personal narratives. OR...to use your own narratives first. Often I say, "that makes me think of this story..." Then I wrap it up by coming back to my own story.

Here is a brief example of a story I told on the morning of *Yom Kippur* (please do not reproduce it without my knowledge. Thank you.)

**"SHMUTZ"** by Susan Stone

This past summer I descended to the depths of our house — the basement — and finally tackled the task of going through boxes and boxes of ancient *shmutz*: high school scrapbooks, hundreds of letters — some from old beaux, some from friends long forgotten, others from those still embedded in my heart. A letter from my grandmother sent to me at Camp Chi in 1961, a letter from Florida from my other Grandma telling me that there was \$5 in the envelope and that I should see a doctor because she heard I had bumped my head on a door. "Be educated," she wrote, "not like me."

Funny, newsy letters sent to me at college from my three younger siblings, filled with talk of *Bat Mitzvah* fashion shopping, the new dog's escapades, the mouse that scared Mom, and missives of love sent in the guise of funny drawings and pleadings for sage advice. And then there were letters sent to me in college in those pre-e-mail days from my devoted parents who both wrote faithfully for four years. Where was I when the letters arrived? Where was I?

I cried and laughed as I remembered my life. And yes, I guess I am a bit of a hoarder.

I had no name for the revelatory experience I had this summer, until I read this story.

Here's a story about *shmutz*:

Once upon a time, a peasant lost his way and found himself in a desert. As he walked, the wind grew stronger and fiercer until he found himself in a windstorm of dust and sand and a mixture of all sorts of things. He pushed his way through the whirling mass and, eventually, the storm died down. The peasant continued on his way.

But as he walked on, he discovered something amazing. With every step he took, he found himself becoming smarter and smarter. He could understand all manner of things: How the birds stayed up in the air, why it was hotter in the summer and colder in the winter. All the things that had always baffled him before were suddenly revealed as crystal clear. Even

questions he had never thought to ask before, he now had the answers to.

After a while, he sat down to rest, taking his sandals off. The moment he did this, he felt himself becoming just as befuddled as before. Yet, the minute he once again slipped on his sandals, all the confusion lifted like the darkness at dawn, and he became again a clever and sensible person. So it was clear to him that the sandals had brought all this about.

What he didn't realize was that the windstorm had blown a leaf from the Tree of Knowledge out of the Garden of Eden, and the leaf had become stuck on the bottom of one of his sandals.

The peasant came to a town in which the King's daughter was very sick. And you know how the story goes... all the doctors had already despaired of her life, and now there was nothing to do but wait for the inevitable. Then word was brought to the grieving King that a simple peasant had come to the palace, promising to cure the princess.

The peasant prepared various remedies and began to treat the princess. In a few days, she had regained consciousness; a few days after that, she was running around as if she'd never been sick.

"Thank you," said the King, as he rewarded the peasant royally. "Stay a few more days in the palace so that the court physicians have the opportunity of studying your remedies." The King was anxious to determine whether there had been real knowledge there, or only some kind of sorcery.

The King's doctors testified that the remedies had been well and wisely chosen.

So the King asked, "How is it that you, a mere peasant, have come by so much medical knowledge?"

"It's my sandals," said the man.

"What kind of joke is that?" demanded the King.

"No joke," protested the peasant. "I 'm telling you, all my wisdom comes from my sandals."

"I will give you half the kingdom and even more if you will give me these sandals." And so, the peasant did.

But it stands to reason that a King can't wear dirty sandals. So he gave them to his servants to be cleaned, and the servants, of course, scraped away the leaf from the Tree of Knowledge along with the other *shmutz*, and when the King put them on he was no wiser or more sensible than before. (Weinreich, B. *Yiddish Folktales*)

...There's wisdom buried somewhere in all the *shmutz* we've picked up along the way, if we take the time to uncover it. It can make us wise, too.

And so my letters were the ersatz *shmutz* that traveled from apartment to apartment, and finally to our damp basement, only to get moldy and dusty. Yes, I could get rid of them, but it would be like scraping off a leaf from heaven. *Shmutz* from the Garden of Eden is NOT *shmutz*.

You may not have old letters revealing to you the blessings that you didn't even appreciate, or your past follies and misconceptions, but everyone has moldy foibles, and dusty transgressions.

This *Yom Kippur*, let us make the time, take the time, to go to the depths of our hearts, to open our hearts, and recognize what to uncover, recover, to make us wise, and what to scrape away; what are our blessings and what we need to toss away like bread crumbs at *Tashlikh*.

What looks like *shmutz* may be a leaf from the Tree of Knowledge....Self Knowledge.