

A LETTER TO DOVID ROSKIES
ON STORYTELLING
AND MAGIC

ELIOT MALOMET

encl.

Dear Dovid Roskies,

I decided to write this paper in the form of a letter to you because letters, as you certainly know, are a most subtle and supple form of communication capable of conveying a tone far more intimate and personal than any paper, and, to be quite frank, I think I write a better letter than I do a paper.

Reb Dovid, you want me to describe to you how seductive storytelling is? You who are seduced by stories? Well I'm sorry. I can't describe it. Oh, I have tried before, come to think of it, it was in another letter, but that attempt was at best, inadequate. But the assignment says that I should focus on storytelling and the art of seduction, so maybe I'll illustrate the art of seduction with a story.

The other day, last week in fact, I saw you walking to the Seminary and I walked up to you and said, "Sholom Aleichem Reb Dovid!" and you replied, "Aleichem Sholom."

"I was thinking about you last night," I said.

"Oh?"

"I was wondering which story I should bring to your house in two weeks."

"You have many?" you asked.

"Yes I do," I said.

I told you that they were not really stories but that they were actually letters, and that letters can in fact be stories. (I was awkward, I know). I told you about one letter particular which I wrote after I came to New York the first time to be interviewed for Rabbinical School. I was so worried that they would ask me about God. Ironically, (well, now I know better) we never got near the subject. In fact, the most profound discussion that I had about God that entire time was with a Jewish cab driver on the way to the airport. That was the stuff of the letter.

"That is the stuff of high comedy," you said. You looked curious and even a bit surprised during the entire exchange. And you said that you'd like to read it. On my way back to Goldsmith I thought, Aha! I've got you!

I hooked you! And like that Kominker yid in Sholom Aleichem's Baronovitch story, I left you dangling (well not as much). But you know what? I think I also left myself dangling, because as I was getting you more interested in reading it, I was myself becoming more interested in hearing your response!

I suppose that that's what we mean by the phrase 'Storytelling and the Art of Seduction.' The storyteller entices his listener/reader to hear or read the story, and in the process of enticing, he himself is enticed.

Absolutely!

The storyteller is drawn to the listener as much as the listener is to the storyteller. Just take a look at those "Stories" from "Prince of the Ghetto." In trying to seduce the woman through his stories, the storyteller himself is seduced by her. (It should only happen to us all that way!) And His stories are suffused with magic. And the storyteller fuses with his listener by means of his extraordinary magical power.

Ah, Reb Dovid. This is the point: Storytelling is really magic!

So nu, go describe magic. Are you familiar with the twelve volume work on magic by J.G. Frazer called "The Golden Bough"? Of course, you must be. Well, when I attempted to read the one volume version of it a few years ago, it occurred to me that perhaps storytelling was indeed a form of or akin to "Sympathetic Magic." Briefly, J.G. Frazer says that there are two basic types of magic, 'Homeopathic' or 'Imitative' magic, and 'Contagious' magic. It's a rather dense discussion and in it I found the following beautiful line,

Both branches of magic, the homeopathic and the contagious may conveniently be comprehended under the general name of Sympathetic Magic, since both assume that things act on each other through a secret sympathy, the impulse being transmitted from one to the other by means of what we may conceive as a kind of invisible ether not unlike that which is

postulated by modern science for a precisely similar purpose, namely, to explain how things can physically affect each other through a space which appears to be empty. (Page 16)

That's storytelling! Isn't there a "secret sympathy" between the storyteller and the listener? Between the writer and the reader? Isn't there an "invisible ether" between the two? And isn't the main goal of the one to affect the other? I love reading about storytelling. Listen to what Ruth Sawyer says and tell me if this isn't magic:

yes!

To be able to create a story, to make it live during the moment of telling, to arouse emotion - wonder, laughter, joy, amazement - this is the only goal a storyteller may have.

It's magic! Taking experience, imagination, language and lore, brewing them all together in a great big cauldron and creating stories. It's like taking the mundane and making it holy. And storytellers are all magicians - 'sympathetic magicians' - creating images and pictures in the listener's mind, arousing emotion in his heart. The listener is enchanted. The reader is seduced.

Oh, I have heard some great storytellers, Peninah Schram, Joan Bodger, Brother Blue. Magicians, all of them! From Magician-land! I heard Elie Wiesel at the 92nd Street 'Y'. It was pure magic!

Now Reb Dovid, I may be going out on a limb here when I tell you this but, if storytelling is akin to Sympathetic Magic, couldn't all of Jewish Storytelling be considered to be 'creative betrayal' because of explain.

Do you know, Peretz exploits this very question in a story called Der Kuntsn-makher (The Conjuror)? And he deliberately used the Germanic kuntsn - instead of the Hebrew kishuf - to play off the pun kunts / kunst

Judaism's fundamental opposition to magic? *I realize that here I am using the term 'magic' literally, nevertheless, could it not be said that the greatest storytellers in the history of Judaism were certainly aware of their mesmerizing power? Convince me that the author of the Akedah wasn't aware of his power as he composed. Convince me that the raconteur of les histoires de Joseph didn't have something up his sleeve. Convince me that Nahman of Bratzlav wasn't deeply aware of his own mesmerizing talent and skill, to the point that he himself thought that he was the messiah. (And speaking of magic, just take a look at his stories!) Each one, in his own magical way is betraying the tradition.

yes!

Nahman betraying the tradition because he was a storyteller?! The stories of the Bible as creative betrayal?! Well, maybe you are right, the idea is a little farfetched. But if stories are magic, and storytellers magicians - Reb Eliot, they are only magicians in a figurative sense, I hear you saying, you think they were really magicians? - well, maybe some were.

What do I really mean when I say that storytelling is magic? I mean that the moments of exchange between storyteller and listener contain a few instances of awe, transcendence and even 'radical amazement.' The spoken word and the silent pause, the furtive glances of the eye, the subtle (and supple) inflections of the voice, all of these things

allow for real seduction to take place.

Especially the voice. Proper use of the voice is the most important skill in storytelling.* I'm sure I could find you a dozen references for that idea in all the stories we read. And especially for Jewish stories, the voice is so important. I have a private little theory that the Massorettes who wrote the notes to the cantillation of the Bible were actually storytellers. They knew how to intone every single biblical word. And you can see this, I mean hear this, every time the Bible is read properly, that is slowly, melodically, the way it ought to be read. When you hear it, it is like listening to a ballad. When I used to daven in Toronto there was a ninety-year-old man who used to read the Torah. He knew it all by heart and read it slowly according to the notes with all of his soul. You could cry.

Storytelling is like reciting a text aloud or by heart with hidden massoretic notes. It is reciting, speaking with your soul. That was the message of ^{my} ~~the~~ other letter, (maybe you want to read it?), and I guess it will have to suffice for this one too. Here, I'll enclose it with this one.

Sincerely yours,

Geet

(A)

*As you demonstrate
so well on Wed.
night.*

yes, of course!

So how about a copy of this letter for me to keep?