

Roskies, David G. A BRIDGE OF LONGING Mass. Harvard University Press 1995
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Schram, Peninnah ed. CHOSEN TALES NJ Jason Aronson, Inc. 1995
436 p --- ISBN 1-56821-352-2

In his insightful Forward to "CHOSEN TALES", Rabbi Avraham Weiss writes of the "The Power of Story". The conviction that this power exercised by story can be harnessed as a dynamic force affecting human behavior, continues to hold the minds of scholars in thrall. It is evidenced by the publication this year of the above two complementary, albeit, seemingly "contradictory" books.

Mr. Roskies begins with writing about Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav who made storytelling the cornerstone of his rabbinic life. The potential power of the story is encapsulated in a statement to his disciples, "They say that stories put you to sleep but I say that through stories you can awaken people from their sleep."

But for those who would like to believe that FIDDLER ON THE ROOF and the stories on which they are based capture the essence of "shtetl" life, Roskies' book will be an illusion-shattering experience.

The stories of I.L. Peretz, Isaac Dik, Sholom Aleichem, I.B. Singer, etc., asserts Roskies, do not paint an authentic picture of East European Life; they are a "creative betrayal" on the part of Jewish writers "to salvage for a nontraditional audience forms of the culture assumed to be traditional."

A BRIDGE OF LONGING is not a "beach book". It is, however, a cerebral and scholarly book that tries to provide perspective on Yiddish storytelling by asserting a theory of what it actually was.

The subtitle of David Roskies' book is, "THE LOST ART OF YIDDISH STORYTELLING" and therein lies the reason for my referring to his book as being in seeming contradiction to the Schram book. The book edited by Peninnah Schram, "CHOSEN TALES" is subtitled, "STORIES TOLD BY JEWISH STORYTELLERS". It is a collection

of 68 stories submitted by active Jewish storytellers from around the world. This would indicate that the art of Jewish Storytelling is far from lost although the tales, for the most part, are admittedly not being told in Yiddish.

Rabbi Weiss in the Forward uses the descriptive words, "Black Fire on White Fire". The "black fire" are the letters of the Torah that represent the cognitive message while the "white fire" are the spaces that transcend the intellect. They "catapult us into the realm of the limitless and the ever-changing, ever-growing. They are the silence, the song, and the story."

This collection of stories that Peninnah Schram brings us through the "mouths" of fellow storytellers is, indeed, "a Jewish Storytelling Festival in print". They catapult us into a diversity of realms with a diversity of "musar haskals" (moral teachings.) Each tale is preceded by a brief "bio" as well as an introduction by the story tellers explaining why this tale is particularly meaningful to them. The tales are delightful and, as one would expect from storytellers, lend themselves to being read out loud.

Here then are two fine books. The Roskies book would appeal more to the scholar in the reader while the Schram book would appeal more to the reader in the scholar. Both of them belong in a Jewish library.

Meyer Zaremba