



Sacred Storytelling

A student in Bais Rivkah Seminary asked an interesting question: When is it okay to invent stories? Is embellishing the details of a story, or saying it happened to you when in fact it happened to someone else, considered lying?

In short, my answer is: If you tell a story **of truth** that may not be factually precise, it is still true, because of what it is and what it does. Let me explain.

THE DANGER OF FAIRY TALES

When the Rebbe Rayatz was six years old, his father, the Rebbe Rashab, was seriously ill, to the extent that he wasn't sure if he would survive. (During the first ten years after the *histalkus* of his father, the Rebbe Maharash, the Rebbe Rashab was ill several times. It may be that the stress of becoming a Rebbe affected him to the point of physical illness.)

So, the Rebbe Rashab wrote a will. It was addressed to his wife, Rebbetzin Shterna Sara, with instructions on how she should raise their six-year-old son in the event of the Rebbe's *histalkus*. The name of the will (which is published) is *Chanoch Lina'ar*.

In it, the Rebbe Rashab strongly urges his wife to be very careful about who their son plays with. He explains that it's not like the old days, even in the recent past, when you didn't have to be so particular about who children played with.

The children of today, the Rebbe Rashab explains, have *middos ra'os*, and speak in ways that just a few years before were unheard of. Accordingly, you must pay special attention to which children he plays with.

Among the causes for this change in children, the Rebbe writes, is that "some of them have books and stories in Yiddish that they share with their friends, which allow thoughts contrary to Torah, *mitzvos* and *tefillah*, thoughts that cool them off [to Yiddishkeit]."

What does the Rebbe mean by books and stories? I doubt he means things that are outright against Torah, because that would be too obvious. I believe that included in this group are stories that have no Torah value, that are empty, and that can bring children to places they should not go to.

In other words, "harmless" but meaningless fairy tales.

Of course, I may be wrong, but assuming I am not, there is a very powerful message here. A *pareve* meaningless story isn't actually harmless. Anything with no **good** value automatically takes the imagination of the child to nowhere, and nowhere is **nothing**, and where there is a space for nothing it automatically gets filled with nonsense. Just making up and

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telling stories isn't simply making up harmless stories, it is inspiring in the child a tendency toward emptiness that somehow compromises their sincerity, integrity, and *emunah*.

We can't just make up fairy tales, if they have no point and no lesson.

THE BIBLE OF MY CHILDHOOD

As a Lubavitcher kid, I grew up on *Talks and Tales*. These compilations of Jewish and Chassidic stories were written in Yiddish by Rabbi Nissan Mindel. I could not read a word of English until after I turned nine years old. To me, *Talks and Tales* was the bible. And there was no question in my mind that every story was absolutely true.

One of the stories, about the *Choshen Mishpat*, had three words at the top: "A *Legende Ma'aseh*." I didn't know what that meant, and I was too embarrassed to ask an adult. When I got older, I learned it meant that "this story is a legend." It was Rabbi Mindel's subtle way of saying that the story wasn't true, but it's one of those stories that's been told for hundreds of

years. But even when I finally learned what "A *Legende Ma'aseh*" meant, I refused to believe it. Again, this was my childhood bible!

Then, about ten years ago, I was forced to confront the truth.

Rabbi Tuvia Blau, a prominent Chabad *chossid* and writer from Israel, published a book of his correspondence throughout the years with a *chossid* named Rabbi Uriel Zimmer, who was living in New York. In one letter, Rabbi Blau had asked Rabbi Zimmer about the *Talks and Tales*. Rabbi Zimmer responded that "it would be appropriate if the stories had a trace of [historical] truth."

I was an adult with adult children when I read this, but it was still hard for me to face the fact that the stories I had read as a child in the *Talks and Tales* were not entirely factual. It would fall into the category of historical fiction. All of the stories are based on real characters or real world events, but they are developed for the purpose of inspiring Yiddishe *kinder*. This was done with the Rebbe's approval.

Clearly, there is a time and place for fiction. But how can we know where to draw the line?

'SHAKESPEARE WAS AH SHIKERE GOY'

Growing up in Crown Heights in the 1970s, which, it seems to me, was the golden age of *baalei teshuvah* in Crown Heights, I met the most amazing people and their mark on me will last forever. My parents *zol gezunt zein* were very involved with the newcomers to Crown Heights, and we often hosted them; we had every type of guest at our Shabbos table. Sometimes the conversations became intense; sometimes my father would ask us to leave the room because the conversations were not for young ears. One of our frequent guests was a *baal teshuvah* who was a real genius. He had three or four PhDs in different fields, and he was a very gifted communicator. His ability to explain things clearly was extraordinary, but he could get carried away sometimes and forget that he was at a Shabbos table and not in a debate hall.

One Friday night, when I was a yeshivah *bachur*, I sat at the table with a friend of mine. This highly educated gentleman mentioned Shakespeare and my friend (who knew much more than

I did about these things) observed that the Rebbe had referred to Shakespeare as “*ah shikere goy*.”

This man had a doctorate in Shakespeare. He had spent years of his life studying his works, and he had explained to me that there is a five-story building known as the Shakespearian Library dedicated just to the analysis of Shakespeare’s works. When my friend made this comment about what the Rebbe had said about Shakespeare, our guest reacted with displeasure, which he voiced. My friend and I pushed back, asking, “What do you mean? The Rebbe said!” We felt justified making such a remark, but he got really upset and began to shout, “HOW DARE YOU?”

I was shocked by this reaction. (Today, I can understand how insulting this comment and our defense of it was to him personally, but at the time his response seemed wildly out of place.) I repeated: “But the Rebbe said it.”

He said, “The Rebbe can say it, but you can’t. If your father had said it, I wouldn’t say a word. But how dare *you*?”

He was so upset that he actually left the table. At this point it was clear to me that I had crossed a line and knew I had to apologize. I followed him to the door, and now softly and abashedly apologized. He was still deeply upset, but his voice was calm now, and he told me the following: “I want to tell you something. I have children who are being raised the way you were. They have your sensibility and attitude. Whenever I tell my children a story, they ask me, ‘Tatty, is the story true?’ You must understand that in the world where I grew up, it didn’t matter if the story was true. It only mattered if the story was interesting.”

These words, spoken softly, have touched me and continue to resonate with me to this day. There’s a part of me that feels that it was almost worth

getting him this upset to hear this *vort*. He enlightened me with something that I still think about. Yidden tell stories for a different reason than most people do. We don’t tell stories to entertain. We tell stories to educate, instruct, and inspire.

When you tell a story that isn’t true, but it educates, instructs, and inspires, is it a lie? The story is fiction, but the inspiration is real.

A TERRIFYING STORY AT THE CAMPFIRE

When I was a counselor in Gan Yisroel in Parksville, the learning director told me that before camp he had a meeting with Rabbi Chaim Mordechai Aizik Hodakov, the Rebbe’s personal secretary. He told the learning directors that they should instruct the counselors to share stories that are educational for the children. He gave the example of *Unpaid Ransom*, a novel by Rabbi Dr. Marcus Lehmann, that is set in the Jewish ghetto of Germany in the Middle Ages. Not every detail of that story is factual but the spirit of it is. The lessons of the story are Jewish: faith, principle, sacrifice, bravery, and survival against all odds.

Counselors are, after all, adolescents themselves, and some of them aren’t entirely cooperative. There was a counselor who had been to camp every summer of his childhood and had heard all the stories of the innkeeper who was thrown into a pit together with his family. Each story ends well; some *tzadik* comes and saves the family and all’s well in the end. We have such stories about every era of our exile and every part of the world (just read *Talks and Tales* or sit down with your grandparents, if you are lucky enough to have them).

Well, this counselor decided to tell

an “honest” story, just for kicks. He didn’t mean to be negative or to plant doubt, but to him all the stories he had heard (that he was now repeating as a counselor) seemed to be just a part of the truth and not all of it, so he was going to give them the other side.

One night at a campfire as the children dozed off to sleep, he told his story. In a dramatic voice he related, “There was once a poor family in a *shtetl*. They had to pay rent for their *kretschme*, but they didn’t have the money. Year by year, their debt grew, until the cruel *poritz* had had enough and he threw them into a deep pit. They were to stay there until some Jews would come and ransom them as was often the case. On this occasion, however, no *tzadik* came. They were never redeemed. Eventually, the children and parents died of cold and starvation... and they were forgotten.”

To the few remaining awake boys he concluded, “You’re surprised? You think there was always a miracle? You think every Jew in a pit in Russia was saved? There wasn’t always a hidden *tzadik* within 30 miles.”

I was a counselor myself and found the story amusing but disturbing. What was the point of telling this story?? What lesson is there in this story?? Were the children meant to learn a lesson of honesty and about the hard world? Perhaps the lesson was that Yidden believe even when no miracle happens? Or, did they learn that they should doubt all the stories with the happy endings they’d ever heard until that point? Are they to doubt all the *tzadikim* they’d heard about, and their *ahavas Yisroel* and their *mesirus nefesh* for other Yidden??

To be sure, this story is terrifying, not only because of the way it ends, but because of what the counselor revealed about himself, his *emunah*, and his role as an educator. That counselor wanted

to destroy the naivete of his campers and their belief in happy endings, because HE had a problem with these stories, and he figured, why not educate his campers to see things his way? That is not what *chinuch* is about.

Of course, we must raise our children with awareness and caution, but more importantly, with faith and hope. We want to teach them that the world is a good place where bad things sometimes happen, not a bad place where good things sometimes happen. That is the purpose of our stories.

The stories of the Baal Shem Tov and the *kretchmes* are true, in some cases actually and in others in the spirit of what life and faith was and is for ourselves and our children.

CONCLUSION

To return to the original question, can you tell stories that aren't true? In my opinion, if the story you tell that isn't true is true, you can tell it. Meaning, if it is teaching a lesson in *avodas Hashem* that is real, if it is based on events that really did happen, if the *inyan* is true, tell it. You can disclose that it's "*ah legende ma'aseh*." That's probably what I would do. But most of *Talks and Tales* does not have that disclaimer, and that was the Rebbe's choice¹.

Storytelling is sacred in Yiddishkeit. It is a way of instilling deep and long-lasting *emunah* in our children. It is crucial that we raise our children

with the right stories, not the kind of stories the Rebbe Rashab cautioned Rebbetzin Shterna Sara about. Not the kind of stories found in secular movies and books that only entertain and have no real value. They do nothing but compromise our children's sincerity. Stories that inspire young hearts and fill their imagination with meaning are always worth telling. And it isn't a crime to let the children know that you may have dramatized the story somewhat.

This article was transcribed and adapted by Musia Kaplan from an online class. Find this and many other fascinating lectures by Rabbi Yossi Paltiel at insidechassidus.org. To find out about live classes near you, email info@insidechassidus.org.

¹ This is my assumption based on Rabbi Zimmer's words.



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