LEHRHAUS
Over Shabbat

Beshalah

Vol. 10, Issue 18 • 12 Shevat 5786 / January 30, 2025

A Story Well Lived

Thomas P. Balázs is an essayist, fiction writer, and professor of English at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

On the last day of class this semester, I was explaining to my fiction-writing students the difference between short stories and life, illustrating a point about what the writer Edgar Allan Poe once called "unity of effect."

In his review of *Twice-Told Tales* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Poe argues that a well-wrought story depends upon "unity of effect"—meaning that everything works toward a single impression. "If wise," Poe writes, "he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single *effect to* be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect."

Poe's language can be abstract, his sentences Byzantine, so I like to ground this idea in a clear, concrete image.

A well-wrought story, I told my students, operates like the workings of an old-fashioned watch. If you remove the tiniest gear from its mechanism, it will not run. Likewise, if you insert into the clockwork anything that doesn't belong, it won't work. A

great story functions the same way. You won't find anything—character, scene, dialogue, or description—that doesn't serve a dramatic purpose.

This is not, however, the way real life usually works, I pointed out.

On the contrary, 99 percent of our lives are filled with trivial, uninteresting moments that, if we were an editor of existence, we would excise for the sake of story.

We spend our days sleeping, eating, obtaining and preparing food, using the bathroom, dressing, earning a living or preparing to earn a living, mindlessly entertaining ourselves, or performing other necessary but unremarkable tasks.

I wasn't trying to give my students lessons in living but in fiction writing, yet one of them told me later that the class had made her "want to lead a more vibrant life."

She didn't explain exactly what she meant, but I imagine she wanted to alter the calculus, to reduce the percentage of trivial moments, to increase the percentage of meaningful ones.

And that, of course, is what we all want. But how do we get there?

In his infamous 1873 "Conclusion" to his art study, *The Renaissance*, the English critic Walter Pater posed this same question and offered a solution.

"A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life," he wrote. "How shall we … be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?"

Pater's answer was that we should pursue "great passions," though he was careful to assert that "wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake," most reward us with "this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness."

(Nonetheless, many read his work as advocating hedonism, which is why this conclusion was omitted from the second edition of the book.)

Pater's essay made a strong impression on the young men of his day. His most famous follower, Oscar Wilde, exemplified the consequences of this philosophy both in his great novella *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and in his own short, brilliant, tragic life. Pater and Wilde were voices of ideas that drove what some call the era of Victorian decadence—but, obviously, such notions still exert great influence in the wider culture.

But Orthodox Judaism, and Hasidic thought in particular, has a different answer to achieving the "variegated, dramatic life."

Instead of sending us out in pursuit of sensation and experience, Judaism imbues with *kedushah* what would, otherwise, be routine, robotic moments. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem

Mendel Schneerson alludes to this in his famous *Ma'amer* "*Basi L'gani*" when he explains that our mission as Jews is to transform the "*shtuyot*" of the world into "*shtuyout kedoshim*," i.e. "holy foolishness." By foolishness he doesn't mean stupidity, but mundanity. It's a reversal of Pater's hierarchy in which the individual achieves transcendence by engaging with powerful, even exotic, external stimuli; instead, the individual draws on his connection to higher spiritual realms to elevate mundanities.

Sometimes this results in practices that can strike the uninitiated as shocking and ridiculous. For example, I recently learned that not only are we supposed to cut our nails in a specific order, but we are to do so only on certain days. At first blush, such "restrictions" seem, to use a technical term, nuts.

I mean, some rules make obvious sense. Making a blessing before and after a meal, for example, imbues the activity with gratitude, and we're not so far away from times when food was an uncertain resource that it's hard to understand the need to be thankful. But that sort of justification is less clear when we come to laws about cutting fingernails or showering or tying shoes (yes, there are rules for that too).

But when you think about what's at stake, the 99 percent of life that's otherwise bereft of meaning, suddenly these "rules" take on a new significance.

Now you can go on to Chabad.org to discover not only the proper order and days but also the underlying kabbalistic reasons for why you should cut the nails on your ring finger first and your pinky last, why you shouldn't cut your nails on Thursday, and why you should be extra careful with the trimmings.

But that's not what I'm getting at.

What I'm getting at is this. When I cut my nails in an ordinary way, I'm just trimming my nails. It means nothing. It's just something I have to do sometimes.

But when I do it in a halakhic way, I'm reminding myself that I live in an ordered, meaningful universe and thus even a simple act of grooming takes on importance in the story of my life. It contributes to the "unity of effect," which is my consciousness not only of Hashem's presence in the universe but also of my role in the grand story He is writing.

Does that mean without cutting your nails in the proper order, your life is meaningless? No, of course not. But you may have lost an opportunity to flesh out your story.

Fortunately, in Judaism, if you miss one opportunity there are many more to come.

Of course, even in Jewish life, there are "filler" moments, moments we cannot, or at least do not, redeem—times when our minds are occupied with the trivial or mundane or maybe by nothing

at all, like when you're driving down the road and suddenly realize you haven't been paying attention and wonder why you haven't crashed.

But by bestowing upon even the most ordinary tasks opportunities for connection with Hashem, Judaism offers us ways to be "present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy."

In a Jewish life, as in a well-written story, everything has its place; nothing is extraneous.

Letters to the Editor: Responses to Ari Zivitofsky on the Sde Teiman Affair

Professor Zivitofsky selectivity applies dan le-kaf zekhut to the Israeli soldiers who were accused of abusing a prisoner – but not to the military police whose responsibility is to investigate such accusations. The Israeli army has a moral code, and there are standards in international law for treatment of military prisoners. If Israel doesn't maintain these standards and allows abuse of prisoners, it damages its moral position. There is no justification for government officials to break into the prison and disrupt arrests. Prior to this incident, there were no complaints that the military courts were prejudiced against Israeli soldiers and predisposed to believing the alleged Hamas prisoners. It is reasonable to assume that in this case there was objective evidence of abuse, besides the accusation by a prisoner, that led to the arrests. It appears that the investigation was initiated following a report by a military doctor.

Does *lifnim mi-shurat ha-din* mean that criminal behavior should be ignored? If found guilty, the previous record of the accused should be taken into account in determining punishment, but it is not a justification for failing to investigate whether criminal acts have occurred. What did those who broke into the prison know that the military police had ignored? If the premise of the article was accepted, there would be no military discipline, and those who are looking to accuse Israel of war crimes would gain credibility.

Yosef Blau

I read "The Sde Teiman Incident: A Retrospective" with concern, not because it engages an incredibly difficult subject–of course it should–but because what could have been a serious discussion about justice, evidence, and Torah values instead reads like an exercise in retrospective vindication, dismissing complexity with sweeping assertions in a partisan voice.

Serious analysis demands respect for all human experiences, including the gravity of the allegations at the heart of this matter, which in broader reporting were described as involving

sickening violence and abuse. By centering a narrative that repeatedly positions one group as blameless and aggrieved while downplaying or omitting the suffering of detainees documented elsewhere, the piece abandons the balanced empathy that Jewish ethics itself calls us to uphold.

Moreover, the tone throughout is defensive and accusatory rather than reflective - a choice that undercuts the author's stated goal of invoking Torah values. Empathy isn't simply a rubric to justify a predetermined conclusion; it's a rigorous moral demand that respects the dignity of all involved. A discourse rooted in compassion would better serve the Torah community. Justifying sexual abuse is always wrong, regardless of the perpetrator or victim, and choosing to platform such justification is at odds with basic Torah values.

In loving tochecha,

Jonah Winer

Book Review: The Devash Jr Book of Shemot

Joshua Ladon is Vice President, West Coast and Senior Faculty at the Shalom Hartman Institute. He and his family live in Berkeley, C.

Many Jewish encounters with Torah begin not in classrooms or synagogues, but by listening to one's parents talk at the dinner table or bedtime, through children's literature. David Hartman once wrote that "the traditional Jew does not begin with immediacy, but by listening to a story from his or her parents… A Jew's self-assertion has to be within the family."[1] A relationship to the Divine, commitment to the tradition, and sense of Jewish identity, on this account, is not discovered in a private spiritual moment, but performed through participation in an inherited drama – retold, interpreted, and embodied in the intimate space of the home.

In that sense, children's Jewish books are not ancillary to Jewish life, nor preparatory tools for "real" learning later on. They are among the primary sites where Jewish memory, theology, and practice are first encountered. As recent scholarship by Miriam Udell, Deena Aranoff, and Rachel Gross has shown, the domestic sphere and reading practices play constitutive roles in how Jewish identities are formed and sustained.

Udell suggests that children's literature can be read as a record of what a community understands to matter most, an expression of the values, commitments, and ways of life it hopes to pass on to the next generation, observing, "every nation's juvenile literature bears the stamp of its founding moment." [2] In her work on modern Yiddish children's literature, that stamp included emerging ideas about child psychology, class,

[1] David Hartman, *A Heart of Many Rooms: Celebrating the Many Voices Within Judaism*. United States: Jewish Lights, 2001. 138.

[2] Miriam Udel, *Modern Jewish Worldmaking Through Yiddish Children's Literature*. United States: Princeton University Press, 2025. xiv.

gender, and class belonging. Mechon Hadar's newly published *The Devash Jr. Book of Shemot,* written by Chana Kupetz and Ephrayim Unterman with illustrations by Rivka Tsinman, similarly reflects the ethos of the institution, which presents the Book of Exodus not simply in moral terms, but also with an eye to lives shaped by study, obligation, and shared practice.

The *Devash Jr. Book of Shemot* is designed for children five and up, and meant to be read slowly, often with an adult, alongside the weekly Torah cycle rather than consumed all at once. It is best read not simply as a children's adaptation of the biblical text, but as a statement about how Jewish tradition is handed down – through shared reading, careful storytelling, and a refusal to underestimate young readers.

The book is organized by weekly *parashah*. Each section opens with the name of the portion, printed in both Hebrew and transliterated English. The story then unfolds across two-page spreads – the facing pages seen when the book is opened – each one advancing the narrative and anchored by a single source note printed at the bottom of the page. Most often, that note is a reference to a specific biblical verse. Occasionally, instead of citing a verse, the book includes a short rabbinic reference of one or two lines, as in the opening on Shifra and Puah, where a rabbinic tradition identifying them with Yocheved and Miriam is noted.

The book also includes a number of small, intentional pedagogical features. Certain Hebrew terms are rendered in transliteration, without repeatedly pausing to explain or translate, helping to acculturate readers to key language over time. Names are referred to in transliteration as well: Israelites are referred to throughout as *Bnei Yisrael*, Moses as *Moshe*, and Aaron as *Aharon*. The plagues are presented in a structured and clear way: each plague is numbered and visually set apart from the prose, with the number printed inside a colored circle that breaks up the text and marks progression through the story. Each is also given a brief descriptive label tied to its defining characteristic – the second plague (frogs) described as "the jumpiest," the third (lice) as "the itchiest and scratchiest" – giving young readers concrete ways to distinguish between them.

The illustrations make frequent use of both ancient and contemporary imagery. Sometimes, these elements appear together within a single scene; in the opening of *parashat Shemot*, as the text describes *Bnei Yisrael* growing and multiplying, for example, children of many ethnicities are shown playing together in a desert setting. Some tend sheep, stand near a well, or chase chickens – details that fit a biblical landscape – while one child, in the same scene, plays hopscotch.

At other times, the book separates ancient and modern imagery across scenes. One illustration may depict a biblical setting, while the next uses a contemporary image to convey its point. In *parashat Mishpatim*, for instance, the laws governing responsibility for another person's property – which differ among the renter, the

borrower, the paid guard, and the unpaid guard – are illustrated through a modern bowling alley, using familiar situations to distinguish between the different legal roles.

The visual language of the book is especially striking in its treatment of key moments in the Exodus story. Scenes such as the Israelites' being freed after the tenth plague, the pillar of fire guiding them through the desert, and the thunder and lightning of revelation at Sinai are rendered with color and movement that give these moments weight on the page. Alongside these scenes, the book also shows considerable visual creativity, such as through a three-page sequence in *Tetzaveh,* that unfolds as though at a tailor, to depict the creation of the High Priest's garments. These are not simply illustrative choices, but visual ways of thinking through the text. In these moments, images function as another layer of interpretation rather than as decoration.

The book's prose consistently takes young readers seriously, presenting the biblical story in ways that cultivate emotional awareness without overstatement or explanation. Rather than telling children how characters feel, the text often allows feeling to emerge through pacing and repetition. When the Israelites reach the sea and sense danger approaching, for instance, the narrative slows and tightens: "When they were near the sea, *Benei Yisrael* heard a rumbling sound. It was getting louder and louder. Could it be? Oh no! The Egyptian chariots were chasing after them, coming closer and closer. What could they do? They were trapped!" The tension of the moment is allowed to build fully, so that the splitting of the sea that follows is experienced not as a sudden spectacle, but as a response to fear and uncertainty already felt by the reader.

Each chapter ends with a short summary page. These pages typically include a brief recap of the episode, a question or idea to think about, and a short list of suggested behaviors or practices – some related to ethical behavior and others connected to halakhic ritual. This is called the "Try It Out" section. Some of these activities are designed to help children connect to the lived experience of the biblical characters. In *parashat Shemot*, for example, readers are invited to embody Miriam's role watching over Moses in the basket by asking their parents if they can, "keep watch over something the way Miriam watched her baby brother." Other activities are more directly tied to halakhic practice. In *parashat Va'era*, which introduces the first seven plagues, readers are encouraged to try out washing and blessing one's hands before eating bread, drawing a connection between Moses raising his hands to stop the hail and the practice of lifting one's hands during the blessing. After learning about the High Priest's clothing in *parashat Tetzaveh*, young readers are encouraged to dress up for Shabbat.

The range of activities helps clarify the book's underlying approach. One might have expected the *Va'era* activity, in particular, to hew closer to the chapter's central themes. The plagues raise large questions about power, suffering, and divine intervention, and a different pedagogical choice could have leaned into reenactment or theological

reflection. Instead, the book uses the opportunity to encourage a halakhic practice, subtly redirecting attention from spectacle to attention, building connection to Jewish tradition through shared practices taken up over time.

The authors do not attempt to include every episode or law in each *parashah*. Instead, the book selects particular narrative moments and halakhic ideas. The result is not a comprehensive retelling, but a curated one, guided by pedagogical priorities rather than completeness. The book also aims to take both its young readers and its material seriously. The biblical book of *Shemot* introduces difficult themes almost immediately, including violence directed at children. In the first *parashah*, the Torah recounts Pharaoh's decree that Hebrew baby boys be killed. The episode is not avoided or reframed beyond recognition. The authors present the decree plainly, writing that Pharoah instructs the midwives to see whether a newborn is a boy or a girl and, "if the baby is a boy, to kill him and make it look like an accident." The language is direct and unadorned, reflecting the severity of the biblical moment without commentary.

It is easy to imagine this passage prompting questions from children reading with their parents. In that sense, the book opens space for shared study, allowing difficult material to be encountered as-is and discussed within the context of the home. This is what I am most excited for – to read this book, and future volumes, with my youngest. Its value will not be realized in a single sitting, but over time, as we follow along with the weekly Torah cycle, allowing it to become part of our shared rhythms. I am curious how reading it might strengthen our Shabbat dinner conversations, which images and stories she returns to, and which practices she is drawn to as these inherited narratives further guide our family's life.