

# Stories Your Rabbi Never Told You

Gilah Langner

THE FIRST WEDDING I EVER PERFORMED WAS a rush job. The couple contacted me two weeks before the wedding date to ask if I was available. I was somewhat surprised at the timing, but I jumped at the chance, since it would be my first time officiating at a wedding. The morning of the big day I found myself fairly nervous. I tried on several outfits, aiming for the right rabbi look — warm and confident, professional, elegant but not too fancy. I finally settled on a suit. I tried on two different colored shoes and went off to ask my husband which looked better with the suit. I found him on the balcony, wrestling a large overhanging honeysuckle to the ground; meanwhile my son needed some last minute homework help, so I was in a bit of a rush by the time I got out of the house.

All of which helps explain why, a half hour later, when I met with the bride for the first time, she looked me over, and with an expression of bemusement, asked, “Why are you wearing two different shoes?”

I looked down in horror, realizing that I had forgotten to switch into a proper pair after consulting with my husband. Of course there was no time to go home and come back again. I must say, walking down the aisle wearing two different shoes was not the professional effect I was looking for.

I got through the wedding, all the while trying rather self-consciously to make my feet as unobtrusive as possible. Right before I could make a graceful exit from the reception, the father of the bride cornered me and invited me to stay for the meal. I explained that having committed this sartorial faux pas, I felt awkward staying. He replied, “Oh, that’s nothing, compared to the wedding of one of my best friends.” And then he told me this story:

The groom had started drinking early on in the day, and not having had anything to eat, was already feeling the effects of the alcohol by the time he got to the *huppah*. The officiating rabbi was an old-timer, with a thick Eastern European accent. When the rabbi got to the key part of the wedding, he turned to the groom and intoned, “Now, repeat after me: *Harei at.*” The groom dutifully repeated, “*Harei at.*”

“*Mekudeshet li,*” said the rabbi.

“*Mekudeshet li,*” answered the groom, sounding more and more like the rabbi.

They continued on through the formula for marrying a bride. Then the rabbi continued: “And now, by the power invested in me...” But the groom was on a roll and before the rabbi could go on, the groom broke in, “And now, by the power invested in me,” perfectly mimicking the rabbi’s accent.

“No, invested in ME,” said the rabbi, trying to straighten things out.

“No, invested in ME,” repeated the groom, hopelessly muddled.

Well, this went on, and by the end of the story, I was completely in stitches, and happy to have escaped my first wedding with only two mismatched shoes to worry about.

It occurred to me that rabbis must accumulate a multitude of stories — their own mishaps, funny anecdotes, encounters with great spiritual mentors, poignant moments — the ups and downs of life in the rabbinate at the extreme moments of life, death, marriage, and everything in between. I decided to start collecting rabbis’ stories, and I’m delighted to offer a handful of tales — with many thanks to their contributors — sprinkled throughout this volume.

“*Rabbi Stories*” appear on pages 36-37, 93, 130-31, 152-53, 184.

Gilah Langner is a rabbi in Washington DC and co-editor of Kerem.

## R A B B I S T O R I E S

At one wedding that I vividly remember, the groom passed out under the huppah. When he recovered he said, please, Rabbi, continue. But two minutes later he passed out again. Once again, when he recovered, he said, please, Rabbi, continue, continue. The third time he was out cold, like a boxer. They had to carry him off. Fortunately the ritual part of the ceremony was completed. It actually turned out to be a very successful marriage.

At another wedding, in my address to the bride and groom, I mentioned that the Haftorah that we read the previous day ended with the words “*chein chein lah* — grace, grace unto her!” And I pointed out that the bride was filled with *chein*, which could be translated as “grace” or “charm.” At the dinner table afterwards, the master of ceremonies arose and declared, “I agree with Rabbi Langner. The bride is indeed filled with *chrain*.” Of course he meant to say *chein*, but it came out *chrain*, which means horseradish. A few people snickered, but interestingly enough, there was not the kind of reaction one might have expected. Either they didn’t know the difference, or maybe they did think she was full of *chrain*.

—Rabbi Allan M. Langner, Montreal

One time I was speaking at a wedding and I used as a text the famous story of Chaim of Sanz. You know the story — a man is wandering in the forest and cannot find his way out, he sees someone else and thinks that the other fellow will help him find his way out, so he goes up to the man and says, I’ve been wandering in this forest and I can’t find my way out, and the other fellow says, I too have been wandering. I know this is not the way, let’s walk together and together we will look for the way.

It’s an often-quoted story, commonly used by rabbis in their introductions to the High Holidays. As I was speaking, I was noticing that the couple were smiling and nodding their heads, and I figured they liked the story too. What I didn’t know, and what I found out later when I spoke with them at the reception, was that the couple had read this story before they got engaged. The whole idea that they should look for the way together was what helped them decide to get married. It was amazing to me, because I had never used the story before at a wedding, and here it was — the story that came to me was their story.

— Rabbi Michael Swartz, Newton, Massachusetts

## R A B B I S T O R I E S

On Hanukah 5767, I took a group of congregants to visit a medium security Federal prison. We stood with Jewish prisoners who had been convicted of a violent crime. First the prisoners lit the candles and then we read the Torah. Then they put tefillin on. I watched in amazement as one prisoner put on tefillin and with tears in his eyes shouted the Shema out loud. I asked what I could do for them. Of all things, they requested the Jewish Press and Rabbi Berel Wein’s history tapes. We sang Hanukah songs together, all the classic ones. And then as it came time to leave, we sang the song about trying to bring a little bit of light into a place of darkness:

*Banu hoshekh l’gareish* — We came to push away darkness.

*B’ya-dei-nu ohr va-eish* — In our hands are light and fire.

*Kol e-chad hu ohr ka-tan, v’khu-la-nu ohr ei-tan* —

Each one is a small light, but together we are a strong light.

*Su-ra ho-shekh, hal-ah sh’chor* — Move away, darkness; go away, darkness.

*Su-ra mip-nei ha-ohr* — Move away in the face of light.

These men weren’t heroes. They had each done something wrong, terribly wrong. I am not condoning what they did, nor am I saying that they didn’t deserve to be in prison, but in their presence I felt the true meaning of Hanukah. It is about the lasting power of a little bit of oil. The oil might not last forever, but it can create a little bit of light in a very dark place.

— Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld,

*Ohev Shalom – The National Synagogue, Washington DC*

If there can possibly be a funny story about memorial names, I submit the following anecdote: One year I received the final form of the synagogue Book of Remembrance, printed just before and distributed at our Yizkor Service on Yom Kippur afternoon. I turned to the page in which we mention the members of the congregation who had passed away during the past year...my heart skipped a beat, and I panicked! The only names listed, in alphabetical order, were last names from A to L. The next moment I was in our Executive Director’s office trying to stop the presses. There is a page missing! I shouted, waving the book.

As it turns out there was no missing page. The only members of our congregation who had passed away during the past year were from the first half of the alphabet! I still don’t know what to make of it.

*Rabbi Michael Feshbach, Temple Shalom, Chevy Chase, Maryland*

## R A B B I S T O R I E S

During the 60's one of the best known figures in the Jewish world, and one of the most admired, was Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was a professor at the Conservative Movement's Jewish Theological Seminary. Heschel wasn't a cloistered academic. He was out on the front lines of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. I had him for a professor, but we never interacted one on one, till one afternoon I was asked by another professor to take some papers up to Prof. Heschel in his office. I went up, knocked, was invited in, handed over the papers, and turned to leave. As I did I saw Heschel push the papers he was working on away from him on the desk, and heard him ask, "How are you?" Just that — but not only. There was something in his voice that put that "How are you?" in a category far beyond normal small talk. He meant it — and to my everlasting chagrin it scared the daylights out of me. I mumbled a quick "fine" and was out the door in a flash. Ever since, I've wondered what the conversation would have been like if I stayed. And ever since, I've been grateful for the question. It taught me how to ask "How are you?" and mean it. It taught me what Buber meant when he spoke of "I and Thou." It taught me how to ask that most common of questions, and to really be ready for an answer.

Sometime in the 1970-1971 school year, when I was Hillel director at the University of Arizona in Tucson, an Orthodox rabbi offered a wonderful statement of welcome to a nervous young man who stood before him to ask a question. The rabbi was waiting to speak at Hillel. As he sat there, the student, who happened to be the student president of Hillel at the time, came up and said, "Rabbi, I'm a convert, and I have a question for..." and then the rabbi stopped him. "Don't say that," he said. "At an earlier time you weren't Jewish, then for a moment only, in the mikveh, you were a convert, now you are a Jew. So, *nu*, Jew, ask me your question."

— Rabbi Robert Saks, Congregation Bet Mishpachah, Washington DC;  
associate rabbi, Columbia Jewish Congregation, Maryland



## R A B B I S T O R I E S

I first found out about my Torah when I visited Rabbi Menachem Youlus' Jewish Book Store in Wheaton, Maryland about five years ago. He said, I want to show you a really special Torah. And he pulled out a three-quarter size Torah, very light, very beautiful, and proceeded to tell me the story.

Menachem rescues and repairs Torahs from Eastern Europe. He had been visiting the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp with a group of people. This time he wasn't there to rescue Torahs, just to visit. But for years he had heard stories about a Torah scroll hidden by a Polish Catholic priest in Bergen-Belsen. This was a priest who had been trying to help Jews. We don't know exactly why he was at Bergen-Belsen, but a Dutch family or a Dutch community had given him the Torah and asked him to hide it. What the priest did was to hide it under the floorboards of one of the barracks.

Later the story got out, and the priest was arrested by the Nazis and tortured to get him to reveal where the Torah scroll was hidden, but he never revealed the information.

Now, while Menachem was telling me this story, I felt like my feet were nailed to the ground. I was totally mesmerized, staring at this Torah scroll, because I had heard a similar story from a friend of mine, Avram, a Dutch Jew who had been hidden from the Nazis by a Catholic family. Avram had been raised as a Catholic and only in early adulthood did he learn that he had come from a Jewish family. Avram had told me a story about a Torah scroll hidden under the floorboards in Bergen-Belsen which he had heard from his older brother who was studying at the seminary.

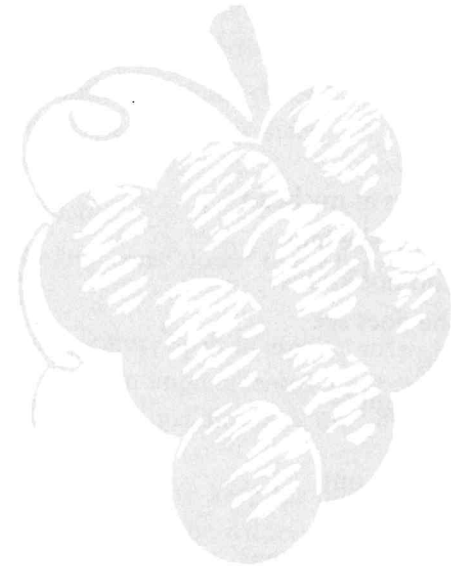
Suddenly there was a very personal connection for me between this Torah and Avram and his family. Perhaps this hidden Torah was from Avram's community in Amsterdam prior to the Nazi invasion!

So how did Menachem find the Torah, which had been hidden all these years? Well, Menachem is a rather slender man, of slight build. On this visit to Bergen-Belsen he happened to be standing by a corner of the barracks where they had kept Jewish prisoners. Apparently the wood floor did not reach all the way to the corners and there was a hole. Menachem began to feel faint, and he swooned, and as he did he fell backwards into the hole. When he recovered, he tried to extricate himself from the hole. He groped around to pull himself up and instead of feeling dirt or gravel he felt cloth, like an old wool blanket. Of course the story came back to him, and he thought: maybe

this is where the Torah scroll is! He went through all the necessary bureaucracy at the camp and the museum to get authorization to dig. Several hours later he pulled out a wooden box wrapped in cloth and blankets. When he opened the wooden box he found the sheets of parchment unsewn from the scroll and placed one on top of the other — a whole Torah.

Menachem managed to purchase the Torah and he brought it back to the States, and spent more than a year working on it. I practically fell in love with the Torah on the spot, but we couldn't yet afford to purchase it. This actually saved the Torah a second time, because a year later our house burned down in a fire. Had we been able to buy it right away, the Torah would have perished in the flames. Instead, Menachem waited for over a year and kept it for us until we were able to purchase it, and it's now in our new home. This fall my daughter will be *leyning* Breishit from this same Torah at her Bat Mitzvah.

— Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, *Kol Ami and Lev Tahor:*  
A Center for Jewish Soulwork, Kensington, Maryland



## R A B B I S T O R I E S

In the fall of 1979, I had finished my undergraduate work at Barnard and had returned to graduate school at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York with the thought that if they accepted women in the rabbinical school, I would apply. I was part of a group of seven women who were in this limbo situation, and we had written a letter to the JTS faculty identifying ourselves as women within the school who were interested in becoming rabbis. Every so often, we would meet with Gershon Cohen, Joel Roth, Anne Lerner, Meyer Rabinowitz, and maybe a few other faculty members over dinner to discuss the situation. Dr. Cohen and the others begged us not to leave JTS despite the fact that when a vote of the faculty was finally taken, the issue of admitting women to the rabbinical school was tabled indefinitely.

One night during one of these dinners Rabbi Roth gave an impassioned plea that we stay at the seminary and “be martyrs for the cause.” We looked at him and the other professors on whose behalf he had just spoken in bafflement — like, what are you giving us in return? They would reply, “Eventually women will be ordained, just not yet.” They also proposed creating a new degree that would be “comparable in duration, breadth, and depth to that of the rabbinical school,” but which would not result in confirmation of the title Rabbi, and would not provide ordination. Instead they proposed to confer the title of Shadar upon the graduates of such a program. Shadar is an older Jewish term for an emissary of the community. The faculty members with whom we were meeting told us that with this degree we would be able to perform many functions needed by the contemporary Jewish community. I was very skeptical. To me it essentially meant: you’ll have all the education, you just won’t use it as a rabbi.

That year, as when I studied at JTS earlier, I davened every day with tallis and tefillin in the weekday minyan. It was still a *mechitzah* minyan in the old library at JTS, and David Weiss Halivni was the presiding rabbi. I was one of the first women to wear tefillin there, and he was always respectful toward me, but it was still awkward because most women didn’t wear tefillin at that point at JTS. That fall, in anticipation of the expected vote in December on whether to permit the ordination of women in the Conservative movement, there was a lot of debate and conversation on the topic. David Weiss Halivni was a teacher and leader of such stature that people many were wondering how he would vote. It became clear that he would vote against admitting women at that time.

One day after services he asked me to meet him in his office. I was very surprised because we had never really spoken with each other. I went and knocked on his door, he asked me to sit down, and with a very serious and sad look on his face he told me that it was hard and even painful for him to have made the decision that it wasn’t the right time to ordain women. He added that he admired my dedication to the Jewish people and he noted my efforts to create a serious religious path for myself. He indicated however, that he could not endorse the ordination of women and that he felt very badly about his decision for me and women like me, particularly because he knew some of us, and it was hard to vote on something that would affect our lives this way. Then he said that he had been trying to figure out something else that I — we women — could do that would be an important contribution to our people — perhaps as important as becoming a rabbi.

He went over to his bookcase and pulled a volume of Talmud down from the shelf, and started reading the text out loud. It was all about the laws of being a mohel. When he finished reading, he said, “I have decided that it would be okay for you to be a mohel. This is something you could do!”

I was stunned! It was a surreal moment, and it was everything I could do not to laugh out loud from a combination of surprise, amusement, and some distaste. He was giving me the biggest gift he could think of, but to me it was an absurd response and solution. As diplomatically as I could, I thanked him for his concern and his attention to my feelings, and the meeting came to an end.

A few days later, I realized that the date of that meeting was during the *aseret y’mai ha-teshuvah*, the ten days of repentance that precede Yom Kippur. I realized that he couldn’t say, will you forgive me — because, after all, he felt he was following *halakhah*. But for such a deeply pious man, this might have been his way of doing *teshuvah* for the pain he believed he was causing me. When I think of it that way, it’s very humbling to imagine that he was doing *teshuvah* with me.

— Rabbi Carol Glass, Coordinator of Spiritual Care, Circle of Caring at Hospice of the Good Shepherd, Newton, Massachusetts

## R A B B I S T O R I E S

My father told me this story about his own father, Rabbi Moshe Langner, who was the Stretiner rebbe in Toronto. In his heyday my grandfather had a large following of hasidim. One of the things he was known for was Simchat Torah night when a parade took place from my uncle's shul, the Narayever shul on Brunswick Avenue, to my grandfather's shul on Cecil and Huron. People lined the streets watching the procession with the Torah scrolls. Then they would all crowd into my grandfather's shul and watch the rebbe dance with the Torah after each *hakafah* [circling of the synagogue]. One year Barnet Brickner, the Reform rabbi of the Holy Blossom Temple, decided to join us. He approached my grandfather, introduced himself, and said that it would be his greatest honor if after the next *hakafah*, he and my grandfather could dance together, just the two of them.

A number of my grandfather's hasidim overheard the conversation and tried vehemently to dissuade the rebbe from complying with this request. My grandfather sat for a while, mulling it over, and then he turned to Rabbi Brickner and said that yes, he would do it. Imagine how extraordinary this scene was — a Hasidic rebbe dancing together with a Reform rabbi — in the late 1920s! When it was over, many of the hasidim came to my grandfather and upbraided him saying, you shamed us, you embarrassed us, rebbe, dancing with a person like that. They didn't spare their adjectives. When they finished, my grandfather sat back and said to them in Yiddish, "*Kinderlach, vos ken ich tohn, ich hob lieb alle Yiddin!*" [My children, what can I do, I love all Jews!]

— Rabbi Allan Langner, Montreal

