

Heaven and Chelm: Writing and Illustrating the Jewish Folktale

Richard Ungar*

Description: Richard's presentation will focus on how he wrote and illustrated *Rachel Captures the Moon* (Tundra, 2001) and *Rachel's Gift* (Tundra, 2003). The presentation will be divided into two parts: the first part will deal with his writing process including how he conducted his research and what sources he consulted ; in the second part of his presentation he will discuss his illustration process, including how he recreated life in a Polish shtetl. Reference will also be made to the works of photographers Roman Vishniac, Alter Kacyzne, and artists Marc Chagall and Tully Fulmus.

Richard Ungar, a lawyer by profession, is the author and illustrator of *Rachel Captures the Moon* (Tundra, 2001) and *Rachel's Gift* (Tundra, 2003). His first book, *Rachel Captures the Moon* was selected by the Association of Jewish Libraries as a Notable Book for Younger Readers (2001), was named one of the best children's books of the year by Bank Street College in New York and was included in the Canadian Children's Centre "Our Choice, 2002". He has studied art in Toronto and Jerusalem and with Canadian children's book illustrator, Mark Thurman. His art appears in private collections in Canada, the United States and Israel.

I always begin the process of creating a children's book on a Sunday... after 12 noon. That is when the Jewish Public Library in Toronto opens. By then I have already negotiated the time off with my wife and two sons. I love going there. I take my big bag. You know, the one with the shoulder strap. It can accommodate six big books. And six books is the limit at the Jewish Public Library. There's no sense making the long trip up Bathurst Street, I figure, unless I borrow all six.

The first thing I do when I get there is check out the folktales. The Library has a nice collection. Some of the folktales are more recent anthologies and others are older volumes. As I browse through stories by Isaac Bashevis Singer and I.L. Peretz, I hear the librarians speaking Yiddish to each other or to the rabbi who comes in sometimes.

It sets the right atmosphere for my quest. I don't know exactly what I'm looking for. But I know that it is there. I spend the afternoon reading folktales. I am reading for enjoyment but I am also reading to see if there is a particular tale that might be suitable for adaptation for children. Not all Jewish folktales of course are children's stories. In fact, in my experience, many folktales are harsh in tone and speak to the misery and sufferings of the Jewish people.

Sprinkled in the anthologies are Chelm stories. There are also several volumes that I have found of just Chelm stories. Two of these are: Solomon Simon's "The Wise Men of Helm

and their Merry Tales” and Samuel Tenenbaum’s “the Wise Men of Chelm”. Simon, in his volume, called it “Helm” (spelled “H-E-L-M”) and Tenenbaum, in his volume, called it “Chelm” (spelled “C-H-E-L-M”). Now, if I were a Chelmite, the explanation for this difference would be obvious. Tenenbaum, I would reason, added a “C” to Helm in deference to the desire of Helmites to lead a peaceful and quiet life. For if it got around that there were two books on the wisdom of the people of Helm, then no end of people would flock to Helm seeking advice!

As you can see, I love the Chelm stories. And I never tire of reading the same ones over and over again. The people of Chelm have a unique brand of wisdom. One might say that they are foolish beyond their years.

If I see a story I like, I trudge downstairs to the photocopy machine. It only costs a dime a copy...that is provided I line up the book correctly!

When I leave the library late on Sunday afternoon, I still don’t know what story I will write next. But the seeds have been planted. In the case of *Rachel’s Gift*, my second book, the story did not come to me right away. I did know that I wanted to write a story about Elijah and I also knew that I really liked the I.L. Peretz story called “The Magician”. In that story, Elijah comes to the Passover Seder and magically makes a wonderful meal appear, to the delight of a poor family. For me, the combination of Passover, Elijah and magic was irresistible.

But it wasn’t until about a year later that I actually sat down to write *Rachel’s Gift*. The first draft was written the evening before the Passover Seder at my home and read to the guests. A nice story, everyone agreed, but when is dessert? Over the course of the next year and a half, I revised it a couple of times, met with my writing group and revised it a couple of more times, met with my editor and revised it yet a couple of more times.

And then it was time to do the pictures.

Back to the Library I went. This is where my big bag with the shoulder strap comes in handy. It is mostly for Roman Vishniac’s “*A Vanished World*”; a big heavy book. But a good weight, if you know what I mean. Vishniac took photographs of European Jews in the years just before the Second World War. He used a hidden camera because according to Vishniac:

“A man with a camera was always suspected of being a spy. Moreover, the Jews did not want to be photographed, due to a misunderstanding of the prohibition against making graven images.” (Vishniac, 1983)

Vishniac’s photographs are haunting. They capture people going about their everyday lives in the years, days and sometimes moments before those lives will be shattered

forever. When I look at the photographs they are so real to me. I feel that I can almost step into them. I use bits and pieces of Vishniac's images in my own sketches and paintings. The way an old man's gnarled hand clutches a walking stick; the expression of surprise on an old woman's face; a Hassid walking with books tucked under his arm; a barefoot boy playing on cobblestones. The images are rich and, even though they represent only a fraction of Vishniac's oeuvre, (most of his work did not survive the Holocaust), there are many images to choose from. I have to be judicious and pick the ones that suit the story I am telling.

I soon discovered another Jewish photographer who took photos of the "old country" at about the same time as Vishniac. His name was Alter Kacyzne. Whereas some of Vishniac's photos have a grainy feel to them, I find Kacyzne's images to be razor sharp. Many of his photos were posed shots taken while he was on assignment for the New York Yiddish newspaper "The Forverts" (the Jewish Daily Forward). Kacyzne's job was to provide images for the illustrated Sunday "Art Section" supplement of the newspaper.

There are other sources I sometimes use for my art. One is the drawings of Tully Filmus. Filmus was an extremely talented draftsman who drew charcoal portraits of people from the old country. Although Filmus lived and worked in Philadelphia, the inspiration of many of his drawings was his memories of a little village where he was born – Otacki, Bessarabia. With a few masterful strokes, Filmus could flawlessly render a sketch of Hassids dancing together. I refer to Filmus' sketches when I need guidance on certain technical matters –for example the position of a kerchief on a woman's face or how a musician holds a violin.

Another excellent source is the Toronto Public Library's picture collection. At its main branch downtown, the library maintains a collection of over 10,000 photos filed by subject matter. If I need a picture of someone reading a book – I simply find the folder marked "figures" action, reading – and browse the photos. When I find one I like I will borrow it from the library and use it as a reference for a sketch. Except, of course, I don't use the photos exactly the way they appear. By way of example, in my first book, *Rachel Captures the Moon*, a photo of a seamstress and a photo of an Ottoman Empire tapestry were "woven" together, resulting in the illustration, on page 19, of Sarah the Weaver weaving a fine blanket for the moon. Likewise, a photo of a present day violin maker tuning a violin was transformed into the illustration, on page 15, of Rafael the Musician getting ready to play a tune to lure the moon.

The paintings of Marc Chagall provide inspiration of another sort. I have a wonderful book on Chagall's paintings by Jacob Baal-Teshuva. I love to gaze at Chagall's paintings, and I particularly enjoy the paintings of his boyhood town of Vitebsk. Gazing upon the swirling colours and images, I am filled with joy.

There is another and, I might say, unintended, aspect of using images as references for

my art. And that is looking at them can sometimes inspire a direction for a story. In my book, *Rachel's Gift*, the “miracle” that Elijah brings is a rose in full bloom at a time of year when it is too early for flowers to grow. The idea of the rose as the “miracle” came to me from a Vishniac photograph. The photo depicts a young girl – she can't be much more than 7 or 8 years old – sitting upright on her bed, covered by blankets. It is clear in the photograph that she is in a windowless basement, not an uncommon home for Jews at that time. The girl is looking straight at the camera with big soulful eyes. But the viewer's eyes are drawn from the girl's face to directly behind her, where, etched on the otherwise stark cement wall is an incongruous drawing of two flowers. The caption of the photograph reads:

“Since the basement had no heat, Sara had to stay in bed all winter. Her father painted the flowers for her, the only flowers of her childhood. Warsaw, 1939.” (Vishniac, 1983)

Two weeks ago, I was on a flight to Vancouver where I was to do readings of *Rachel Captures the Moon* to Jewish day school students at the Isaac Waldman Jewish Public Library. The reading material for my flight consisted of the introductions to the books by Kacyzne, Chagall, Filmus and Vishniac.

Even though I had owned each of these books for a number of years, I had only looked at the photos or pictures and never really read the introductions. And, when I finally did, I was struck hard by something. Without fail, in describing the works of these artists, each editor made reference to the same dominant theme - “the love of their people”.

Chagall put it quite simply:

“Despite all of the trouble of our world, in my heart I have never given up on the love in which I was brought up or on man's hope in love.” (Baal-Teshuva, 1998)

And in that respect, I feel a connection to Chagall, a connection to Vishniac, a connection to Kacyzne, and to Filmus and to Tenenbaum and to Simon; a connection and a sense of great pride. Pride in being part of a larger tradition. Pride in my own Jewishness. And pride that comes in knowing that perhaps, if I am lucky, with the right turn of a phrase or swirl of a paintbrush I too will be able to impart the love of my people to the next generation.

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