

**READ ME A STORY/TELL ME A STORY: SO WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE**  
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**Description:** The verbal art of reading from text and storytelling within text have always been interwoven in the Jewish tradition. From the beginning, Jews have shown a great need and respect for oral interpretation. This presentation will delineate differences and similarities between two types of oral traditions and demonstrate both these performance arts: reading stories and telling stories.

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**OPEN** with **telling** the first part of a longer frame folktale: “The Emperor’s Daughter and the King’s Son” (in Stories Within Stories: From the Jewish Oral Tradition, 36-45) and then by **reading** an excerpt from Mary Antin’s “First Day in School” in

The Promised Land, 202, 206-208).

From the beginning, Jews have always had a great respect for orality. At the time of the giving of the Written Law (*Torah shebikh’tav*), God gave to Moses the Oral Law or Unwritten Torah (*Torah sheb’al peh*). From then to the present, the Jewish people have had a dynamic interaction between text and the oral tradition. What Jews regard as most sacred, though, is the Written Torah which, to put it into more secular terms, is a scroll in a bookcase. **Question:** Why did the Talmud remain ORAL until it was finally codified in 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> C.E.?

While the Oral Torah remained oral, there were teacher/scholars, called *Tannaim* (Aramaic for “repeater”), transmitted these teaching orally. Often referred to as “living books”, these *Tannaim*, who lived in the first two centuries C.E., during the Talmudic period, served as an important link between the periods of the oral and the written texts. By the way, the Chinese term for storyteller is **shuo shu** which means “to recite books” – an oral activity based on written.

The Torah together with the Oral Law, the oral tradition (lower case “o”) is central to the reinforcement and transmission of Jewish values. The oral tradition is the accumulation of Jewish folklore, legends, customs and folk wisdom that are

passed along by word of mouth. In addition to the wealth of new interpretations from every age, the oral tradition preserves various styles of telling, different versions of stories, and so on. In a sense, the oral tradition exists alongside the Oral Law, yet remains separate.

While the written word is greatly revered and provides a rigid framework for the normative religion, the spoken word remains a key focus in Judaism and treated with respect. After all, the Torah is read aloud every Shabbat, on Mondays and Thursdays and holy days. In addition to the Torah and Haftorah, we have the oral reading of the Megillah on Purim, and we are obliged to hear every syllable, and the Hagaddah on Passover, with added poetry and stories, so that we can relive the journey when “we were slaves” to the time of our becoming a people. We have the reading of the Book of Ruth, Lamentations, and other megillot.

Many of the oral stories circulating among the folk (some from the Talmud and many from other cultures) were eventually written down, collected and published, primarily because of the efforts of rabbis and scholars, especially from the eleventh century on, and more recently of folklorists, ethnographers, anthologists, and now storytellers. All of these collections have helped the growing number of people interested in telling Jewish stories find good stories to tell, often in several versions. This, in turn, has led to more storytelling, which has prompted more publishers to produce more books, and on it continues. During the past four decades, more collections of Jewish stories have been published than for many years before. And coincidentally, since the early 1970s, there has been a vigorous renewed interest in the art of storytelling in the world generally, and in the Jewish world specifically. I believe that there is a connection between the two: the printed word impacting on this revival of the oral telling.

Personally, in my case, I was raised on stories, biblical and parabolic, and told them to my children. However, when I recorded Isaac Bashevis Singer’s first book of children’s stories, Zlateh the Goat, for the Jewish Braille Institute in 1970, I was inspired to write a proposal to the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y and to create my first series

of storytelling programs there. So I was brought into the oral arena by a written source.

However, Plato felt that the written word was inferior to the spoken. Why so? “Writing is speech put in visible form, in such a way that any reader instructed in its conventions can reconstruct the vocal message.” (Michael D. Coe’s Breaking the Maya Code, 13). I call it all a miracle.

Humans are not born readers, rather we are born with the mechanism to develop voices and sounds through imitation (if we have healthy hearing) and to interpret symbols, such as words, orally and written. And based on all the research, we can say that reading and being read to, as well as hearing stories without a book, are an essential means of education and does lead to improving writing and reading skills, fluency, vocabulary, recall, and more. All these skills are intertwined: speaking, reading, listening, writing. And what must not be overlooked is that once the children begin to read to themselves, they then learn to read with mental sounding. [Read excerpt from Eudora Welty’s memoir One Writer’s Beginnings, 1. Focus on Welty’s line: “Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn’t *hear*.”]

Children become more active readers by transferring to reading the heard sounds in the text. It is a misnomer to say that one reads “silently.” As Louise Rosenblatt has written about reading a poem, it is “...an event in time. It is an occurrence, a compenetration of a reader and a text.” There is an interaction, a transactional event, whether the reading is aloud or to oneself, but it is never done “silently.” It then becomes a more satisfying experience with more meanings evident to the reader.

The stories told, read, and heard in childhood fill the storehouse of memories from which the person can draw the needed wisdom, perhaps many years later.

**[Relate when I was a child my father told me an Elijah story with the phrase “and Elijah gave a whistle” which triggered the entire story in my hearing/sound memory.]**

Stories nourish a person and stimulate creative imagination. Images remain longer in the mind than do lessons taught in other ways. The arts of storytelling

and oral interpretation do not exist for literature alone – but for people! In a sense, the reader/storyteller becomes a member of his/her own audience. The spoken/listening shared experience creates a bond between the teacher/student, librarian/students, parent/child, friend/friend because it is a shared experience of one person telling to another. There is no substitute for the human voice telling or reading a story.

What are some of the **PROBLEMS** of setting a spontaneous oral story on paper? (Get audience response)

What are some of the **SIMILARITIES**?

What are some of the **DIFFERENCES**?

We are not talking about advantages or disadvantages. Reading a text aloud is an art on a continuum with the art of telling a story. They have central concerns: the story (written or unwritten), the reader/storyteller, and the listener.

Let's examine the similar tools of a **storyteller** and an **oral interpreter** since both are recreative artists. Voice, words, eye contact, imagination, movement/gestures, a direct communication with the audience. **The voice, the body and the imagination are the three major tools of the communicator.**

The voice, which is the primary tool, must be used to convey nuances of character, color of the setting, and the emotion of the situation. The voice must have an “alive” quality (not necessarily a Shakespearean voice) so people will want to listen and be flexible like a musical instrument. However, the voice must never call attention to itself for it is the conveyer of the meanings of the worlds found in the literature.

The use of pause and timing as well as rate/pitch/volume variations are all important to create and evoke the mental images in the listeners' heads.

Suggestion, rather than total involvement with any character, is the key to storytelling and oral interpretation. Suggestion rather than acting out of the action is the guideline to be followed by both artists. Suggestion of the dialect is advisable – work with rhythm and variations of voice. In this way, the storyteller/oral interpreter can shift from one character to another or from

narration to dialogue to exposition, etc. more easily and with more fluid continuity. There is, of course, total mental involvement and concentration, but only a select and discrete physical “acting out” of all parts. (I might add that with little ones exaggeration can be used – )

But some differences between reading literary texts and telling stories without a text can be noted:

1. In **WRITING**– the words in a text on a page are structured carefully – in a more formal style – and honed with usually the specific known author’s style, sometimes the structure itself is sophisticated (e.g. James Joyce’s Ulysses - Bloomsday reading for 15 hours at Symphony Space). **Complex sentences** can be used without hesitation. **Punctuation** on the page developed through the centuries more for the EYE than for the EAR – (vs Torah without punctuation). So the **READING** needs more breath control and careful phrasing to communicate the meaning and instant comprehension. **[Read** excerpt from opening of a new vision of the Creation/Garden story, A Tree in the Garden, by Miriam Oren and Peninnah Schram]

**TELLING** - a story demands an oral style which means short simple sentences, fragmented sentence sometimes, simpler vocabulary, dialogue, selection, repetition, less description because of the use of paralanguage (voice/body/eyes/gestures, etc.), rhetorical devices (“and so what did he do?” Also rhymed openings and endings.) It is difficult to translate the oral to the page for these many reasons. And making the words on a page “live” in the mind and mouth of the teller and in the minds of the listener is also a difficult task. Oral words have a dynamism. As Richard Chase has said, “You have to take the words off the page in order to make them go right.”

2. **READING** – The text is “written in stone” with “trapped words” (Marshall MacLuhan, 84) and cannot be changed or altered significantly, except for

some careful cutting for timesake. But the reader must always remain faithful to the intent of the author.

**TELLING** a text allows for spontaneity, for adding/changing/commenting so that the teller can modify the story, create a new variant, even with a traditional tale. The storyteller can adjust it to the greatest interest of the listeners, or to what the concerns of the moment are or special problems are. This is the “fluid folklore process.” A written folktale is, in a way, an oxymoron. [Read excerpt from Schram’s essay “Jewish Models: Adapting Folktales for Telling Aloud” in Who Says?, 76-77]

3. **READING** - allows the reader to make some/limited eye contact, but the text is there between them. Reading is more text oriented and you must refer to the text, unless it’s memorized. Even then, the book is visible which “allows the audience to keep a degree of psychic and aesthetic distance...to respond to the literature instead of the performer.

**TELLING** demands eye contact! Telling establishes a direct interactive bond. In this way, the story becomes the storyteller’s even when the source is given (unless it’s a personal story).

4. **READING** The reader is the medium with the focus on the text.

**TELLING** The storyteller is a more interactive partner with the story and the listener. There is a dialogic relationship. A good teller can move people.

5. **READING** There is a need for the use of silence – not only where there is comma or space (as in e.e. cummings poems), but with breath and phrasing, etc. for timing.

**TELLING** There is also a need for the use of silence – with phrasing, as part of sound and for timing. But in telling, silence can be filled with mime, gestures, facial expressions, walking/movement to make transitions.

6. **READING** has more credibility and a wider range of material in our society where memorization and storytelling repertoire are more limited.

**TELLING** has a different kind of credibility depending more on the storyteller and the story. Internalizing the images versus memorization is the approach in storytelling. Verbatim memorization is part of the art of acting – not a major part of storytelling. Memorization of the p'shat/sequence is necessary for storytelling. Stories in the oral tradition were never meant to be frozen in time. The storyteller keeps linking the present with the past – and thus stays “in the moment.”

Let's turn to some **definitions** at this point:

**Interpretative reading** has been defined by Charlotte Lee and Timothy Gura in this way: “Interpretation is the art of communicating to an audience a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety” (3).

**Storytelling** has been defined by Norma Livo and Sandra Rietz in this way: “Storytelling, then, is an oral art form whose practice provides a means of preserving and transmitting images, ideas, motivations, and emotions that are universal across human communities” (7).

As we can see, both oral interpretation and storytelling are art forms through which a person projects mental and emotional images to an audience using the spoken word. Both artists must carefully consider the audience needs regarding the choice of the story and the way of presentation. The written or hearing literatures reflect all types of literatures and cultures. The various goals of the interpreter and storyteller include educational (formal and informal), historic, folkloric, entertainment and therapeutic purposes.

Enhanced storytelling, storytelling, interpretive reading – taking the story and adding the spoken voice and full person to a text with the effect of having the audience respond to the reader's or storyteller's response to the literature! Whatever it's called, we must do more of it. These arts promote literacy and enhance imaginative listening. Children understand narrative structure intuitively (beginning, middle & end). Vivian Gussin Paley explores this idea in The Boy

Who Would Be a Helicopter. It brings them comfort, enjoyment, information, all with the main goal to help create meaning in their lives. The most important thing is to stimulate the sense of curiosity and wonder.

Richard Dorson states: “Among the Jewish people the telling of stories and the learning of the faith are interwoven in a manner unparalleled in other countries of Western civilization” (Foreword to Dov Noy’s Folktales of Israel, v). While the written word is greatly revered and provides the framework for the religion, we see how the spoken word remains a key focus in Judaism as the proverb illustrates: **“A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.”** (Proverbs 25:11). Indeed, it may be said that **“the words that are transmitted orally are the more valuable.”** (Maybe Plato was right?) (Hagiga, chap. 1 – 12<sup>th</sup> tractate in Mishna).

As humans, and human narans, all we have are words. We need to go back to telling more stories, reading more stories aloud, sharing the experiences of all times.

**END by telling** a story: “The Great Debate” in Jewish Stories One Generation Tells Another, 315-317.

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