



## **Mitzvah Stories: Seeds for Inspiration and Learning**

Goldie Milgram and Ellen Frankel [Eds]  
with Peninnah Schram, Cherie-Karo Schwartz & Arthur Strimling

### **DISCUSSION GUIDE**

*by Shoshana Silberman*

**Educator and Author of *A Family Haggadah,*  
*Shema Yisrael Siddur, The Whole Megillah,*  
*Tiku Shofar & Active Jewish Learning***



This discussion guide is dedicated  
to the memory  
of Dr. Mel Silberman



*I also wish to express appreciation for the creative and editorial support of  
Daniela Enriquez and Rabbi Goldie Milgram*

*--Shoshana Silberman*

**Which mitzvah/mitzvot does each story address?  
What is your relationship to each mitzvah?**

### **Section I.**

#### **Coming to Wholeness: Mitzvot of Love and Healing**

*Page 40 - The Burga Baby by Yossi Alfi*

1. The narrator is so conflicted about his burga-derived role, as one who gives blessings. What is your sense of why he felt this way?
2. Do you have a uniqueness that has proven challenging?
3. What touched the narrator so much by the return of the burga?
4. Since the day the biblical Adam was assigned to name the animals, we humans have had the capacity to name and define. In our own era, unusual people have been redefined, as "gifted" rather than "difficult" and "special needs", as opposed to "retarded." When is a label an advantage, and when is it a burden? Can you suggest other "redefinitions" of a state of being?
5. In the story, the baby's burga was made into an amulet, which was used to heal the sick or to help the dying attain tranquility. Do we create our own modern versions of amulets?
6. What have you experienced or witnessed that is surprisingly healing or comforting in the form of things, words and/or actions? Is there a difference between superstition and belief?
7. In discussing the story, the author explains that he hopes each of us will believe in our own power and strength. What enables us to give to and receive blessings from others?



Page 46 - *A Father's Gift* by Noa Baum

1. In this story, *A Father's Gift*, the author learned something about his religious and genetic lineage. Would it matter to you, if you did or did not have religious or genetic connections to those of other religions or other peoples?
2. While it is difficult for most Jewish families to create an extensive family tree, due to the vicissitudes of wars, perhaps you have done one as far back as you can. How was the experience for you? How do you feel about the idea of exploring your family's religious lineage and placing it onto your family tree? Might you contribute a blood sample of your own to The International Genome Project? Will you ask for a report of your family's history of genetic diseases and traits?
3. Each of us has a genetic family and a second "family" composed of the people who are closest to us. In your own nuclear family, is there diversity? If yes, describe your experience. Is one of these two families more important to you? Or not really? Why, why not?
4. Think about people you consider a part of both your genetic family and your second family of dear ones who are both related and close friends. How do they differ? How have these differences enriched you? Which differences have been problematic?
5. In John Lennon's song, "Imagine", he proposes that having "no religions" would be helpful to create a more peaceful world. What do you think?



Page 50 - One Day at Stone Mountain a friend's experience reframed by Renée Brachfeld

1. If you have ever been a caretaker or a child in a family with a sibling who is ill, describe your reaction to the family's outing.
2. How many things could we notice and enjoy if we only stopped a moment from the daily rush to listen and watch? Name a few.
3. What would you like to do to create a day of family togetherness? What stands in your way?
4. Do you feel there are many "Elijahs" in this world, or relatively few?

5. Have you ever been helped by a stranger? Tell your story. If you did not have the opportunity to thank him or her, express your gratitude now, either in writing or aloud before those present.



Page 55 - Mr. Kharrubi and Me by Helen Engelhardt

1. Before beginning a discussion, sit quietly reflecting on the changing emotions the story elicits from beginning to end.

2. What emotions came up for you in each part of the story? After reflection, call out adjectives that describe your emotions for each part of the story.

3. There is a Jewish value, *dan l'chafz'chut*, "judge favorably," or, "judge on the side of merit." How does this play into the story? Is this value a reasonable philosophy of life?

4. What is it about the way the two main characters in the story communicate, that allows them to become friends?

5. Share stories of people who have suffered at the hands of others, or simply fate, and then have gone on to fight injustice or disease.

6. How do you honestly think you might have acted if a loved one was killed on a flight, or your family lost everything in a war? Does this story reinforce your position or make you want to reconsider it?

7. What are your hopes, dreams, and fears for Israelis and Palestinians? Do you see peace in the future?



Page 60 - Saved by the Evil Eye by Ellen Frankel

1. Begin by sharing some of the *bubbe maisses*, (Yiddish colloquialism for "grandmothers' tales") which you have been taught. Do you still follow any of them?
2. Do you sometimes include *kayna ahoras* when you speak? How do you feel about this folk "inheritance?"
3. Children and teenagers often think that parents make rules and decisions to simply obstruct them. With time, we understand that many decisions were made in order to protect us. Recall a time this happened to you.
4. This story's folk practices were created in perilous times. Have we created modern substitutes?
5. Have you known someone who changed his/her Jewish name when ill, in accordance with the old tradition of tricking the Angel of Death? Or who added Chayyim, "life" as a first or middle name, for this reason? What power does this ritual have for the person choosing it? For their family? For his/her community? Can this ritual affect well-being or long term survival?



Page 62 - *The Clubhouse Turn* by Leon Olenick

1. Do you agree that the trip to the racetrack was a mitzvah?
2. What qualities did the chaplain reveal that made it possible for him to envision the trip?
3. Share about when someone, with all good intentions, did a mitzvah for you that did not meet your needs. What would you have better appreciated?
4. Did you ever do a mitzvah that you later realized was not helpful to the person you intended to aid? If you could have a "do-over" what would you change? Share this reflection, if you are comfortable.
5. This story inspires us to do a mitzvah "before it is too late." Is there a mitzvah you meant to do that you wish you had before it was too late? Reflect, share. Note: A *tikkun*, a repair,

can be made by thinking of a mitzvah, that you can do, in the coming week (something you have been meaning to do for awhile) and just do it!

6. The chaplain's intervention required a great deal of orchestration and planning. Was this, in your view, a good use of his time?

7. Would you consider helping in such a scenario? Do mitzvah teams to help create major mitzvot for hospice patients exist in your area? Would this be a good volunteer project to develop?



*Page 65 - Joe the Butler by Danny Siegel*

1. Share about a time you were touched by the brief words or small act of someone's radiant goodness.

2. Does the chain of events described in the story seem too fantastic to ever have occurred, or do you think it is possible they did?

3. Our tradition teaches that *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, "one mitzvah leads to another". Do you believe this is true?

4. Does it matter if a mitzvah doesn't create a chain of mitzvot? What if it only endures for an instant, as in this story?



*Page 67 - Flowering Words by Laura Simms*

1. Compare this story with other tales involving a test or trials. How is it similar and how is it different?

2. The princess marries for love, against her father's wishes. How important is "marrying for love" to you? Can "marrying for love" ever be unwise? How can we decide?

3. Can it ever be healthy or holy for a parent or child to cut each other off from relationship?

4. Shavuot is the annual re-commitment ceremony between the Jewish people and God. What is the role of love in our relationship with the Divine?

5. In Numbers 13:1-15:41, God sends a chieftain from each tribe to scout out the land of Canaan. In their report they acknowledge that the land is full of milk and honey, and also that the local people are powerful and the cities fortified. Ten of the scouts, however, emphasize that the land "devours its settlers" and is filled with giants. Only two are optimistic that the Israelites have the ability to conquer the land. What do the spies have in common with the three husbands? Compare both outcomes. Were the realists unduly punished? Was the end result just? Place yourself on the continuum...which position would you have taken in each situation?

6. Has there ever been a major challenge in your life that you were determined to overcome, and knew you would succeed?

7. In "Flowering Words", how does storytelling "save us?"

8. How can we both understand and accept reality, yet believe in stories?





Which mitzvah/mitzvot does each story address?  
What is your relationship to each mitzvah?

**Section II.**  
**Expanding the Heart: Mitzvot of Joy and Generosity**

*Page 74 - The Mitzvah House by Roslyn Bresnick-Perry*

1. Do you have a family story about a relative who helped people during the Depression era, or in regard to World War II, or emigration from the former Soviet Union, or a South American country, etc?
2. What are family obligations to each other in your view? How far is a person supposed to go when family needs support?
3. Suppose your neighbors lose their home because they can't pay their mortgage. Do you see any obligation to take them in and help them get back on their feet?
4. Does the story of Aunt Esther inspire you to increase your mitzvot, or intimidate you because you feel you'll never be able to be that giving?
5. What can we do to make our homes more of a "mitzvah house?"



*Page 77 - The Hitchhiker by Joel ben Izzy*

1. Have you ever hitchhiked or picked up a hitchhiker? What advice do you have on this subject? Is it a mitzvah?
3. Were you more disappointed in the story's ending, or more worried about what happened to the hitchhiker--that he was unable to show up for the job the storyteller found for him?
4. Does it matter what a recipient does with our *tzedakah*? What if, for example, a street person buys alcohol with your donation?
5. So nu - was our storyteller a fool?

*Page 81 - My Mama's Elijah by Lynn Mirvis*

1. In many folk tales, especially ones about Elijah the Prophet, we are challenged to give directly to a person in need. With some exceptions (e.g. serving food at a shelter) we give *tzedakah* by writing a check or using a charge card. How is this experience different from the experience described in the story?
2. Do you know of charities that involve the giver in some way?
3. What is it that sometimes stops you from doing the right thing?
4. Did you ever have an Elijah experience?
5. As you reflect on this story, what do you hope your family members or friends will remember about you?



*Page 85 - The Melody by Nadia Grosser Nagarajan*

1. Priya and Leah brought love to each other in a way that cannot help but touch us. Was there anyone in your life who has brought you unexpected love?
2. Leah and Priya did not need words to express their reciprocal love. When have words been superfluous in your life?
3. How does the setting enhance the story?
4. What role does music play in the story? In your own life?
5. In your opinion, should the few Jews left in exotic places be encouraged to emigrate or should we support their efforts to stay in the places of their birth?
6. The person named Isaiah, in this story, died happily after satisfying his life's dream of seeing Jerusalem. What is your life's dream?



*Page 91- Life Lessons by Neal and Carol Rose*

1. Why didn't Carol and Neal want to accept charity?
2. How did Mr. Golding's reason for the donation make the couple's acceptance of it possible?
3. We learn in the *Shulchan Aruch* (a codification of Jewish law) that when you allow someone to do a mitzvah, it is a double mitzvah that redounds to both of you. Do you find it hard to let others help you? Does this concept help you consider letting them do so?
4. Imagine a "Women's Seder" that can only be attended by those who gave at least \$613 to the sponsoring organization. Is this ethical and appropriate? Why? Why not? How do you feel about fundraising in the Jewish community as you've experienced it? If not this way, how would you ensure funding for social services and other causes?
5. There is a Jewish teaching, *mitzvah goreret mitzvah* (One mitzvah leads to another). Have you experienced this phenomenon in your own life? What happened?
6. When you receive assistance from family, friends and community during an illness or difficult time, there are many ways to show gratitude, including donating to a charity in the name of each person who came through for you. Recall someone who gave you the gift of his/her kindness and think of a way to "pass it on."



*Page 93 - The Demon of Dubrovna by Gail Rosen*

1. What made the old woman in the story such a *tzadeket*, "righteous person," and what made her so courageous?
2. In *Pirkei Avot*, the rabbis teach, "Who is wealthy? The one who is accepting of his/her lot," also interpreted as "Who is rich? S/he who is content with what s/he has." Do you agree?
3. Folk tales such as this were often told in places where poverty was prevalent. In this story, the old woman sees the changes (ones that we might view as unfortunate) as a "little bit of luck." Can you relate to her form of acceptance?
4. In this story, the demon is, obviously, a metaphor for change. What is it about change that frightens you? What about change excites you?
5. Have you ever experienced a change that was viewed as unfortunate, but turned out to be a blessing? What role did you play in this transformation?

*Page 98 - Elijah's Yellow Balloon by Rebecca Schram-Zafrany*

1. Why did Dorielle want a yellow balloon so much? What did it represent for her? Did you ever want something so much that it affected your behavior?
2. With what type of boundaries were you raised? What were the consequences of the boundary setting that you experienced growing up?
3. If this were your child, how would you honestly have handled the situation?
4. Is the Elijah in this story a kind doer of *chesed* (acts of loving kindness) or an enabler of the parent's difficulty with boundary setting?
5. In the biblical story of the Golden Calf, when Moses does not return from the top of the mountain, Aaron gives in to the demands of the people and builds the Golden Calf. He appears to do this to soothe anxieties until Moses arrives. For some, Aaron is considered a peacemaker. For others, he is viewed as having made a grave error. On which side are you?
6. This story gives us the wonderful opportunity to discuss what boundaries we want to set regarding (grand)children's behavior and what lessons we want to teach them, while simultaneously taking their happiness into consideration. It also raises the question of how do we define an "Elijah?"



*Page 104 - A Single Seed of a Pomegranate retold by Cherie Karo Schwartz*

1. Who doesn't love a tale where cleverness frees a person from a dire situation! Has this ever happened to you in "real life," or in a dream?
2. "Do Not Steal" is one of the Ten Commandments. In your opinion, is what Shlomo did actually theft?
3. Although this story happened "very long ago", cruel despots and unjust laws exist in our own time. What approaches to change do you find inappropriate, and which do you endorse?

4. Are you aware of a present day law where the punishment does not fit the crime? What situation brought this to your attention?
5. The news is full of cheating at schools, political scandals in our government, and financial fraud. Do you think this is a strong part of human nature? How can honesty be encouraged in our society?
6. Can you relate an apparently miraculous or transformative moment that changed people's attitudes and behavior? Is one incidence enough to make a sufficient difference?



*Page 110 - Grandma and Mr. Pushke by Corinne Stavish*

1. What ingredient made the grandmother's baking taste so special?
2. In the story, grandma is a mentor to her granddaughter, both as a baker and as a mitzvah-centered person. Have you ever been mentored on doing mitzvot? Culinary skills? Describe the experience.
3. Why do some people feel it is better not to give, or accept, charity?
4. Not being in charge of finances can have serious consequences for women. Here, grandma is literally at the mercy of her son, Max. How does her being able to sell her baked goods change everything?
5. Do you have control of your own finances? If no, do you want to gain such control?
6. Do you recommend each member of a family giving *tzedakah* independently, or do you prefer family giving?
7. Did you find the story's ending surprising?

*Page 114 - Disarming the Enemy by Shlomo Carlebach retold by Diane Wolkstein*

1. In Judaism, it is acceptable to reproach another when necessary. What made Rabbi Naftali's reproach so effective?
2. If you could redo an unsuccessful reproach you made, how would you do it now?
3. How is social class still a part of Jewish communal life?
4. What are the ethics of financial aid, in your opinion? For synagogue membership? Other situations?



*Page 116 - The Girl Who Told Stories by Steve Zeitlin*

1. What is the meaning of the girl's search for new stories?
2. "Once upon a time there was..." Think about a beginning to the story of your life.
3. Young children often want to be read the same bedtime story over and over. Adults rarely read a book so many times. Why is that?
4. Known as "the people of The Book," the text many Jews reread each week, every year, is the Torah. Why, in your view, do we remain in relationship with Torah and engage in the tradition of adding new interpretations in every generation?
5. Offer examples of how emerging values and technologies are affecting the transmission of Torah and its interpretation?
6. The story implies that the storyteller is a lone artist, both a part of the community but also outside it (for example, the girl never marries.) To you, what is the ideal life for an artist? What is the importance of community to an artist? And for a spiritual leader? For you?
7. Is the role of an artist to entertain or teach? Does the artist create primarily for him/herself or for others? Horace's definition of the aims of poetry is to "either to please or to educate;" what about for Jewish educators and spiritual leaders?

Which mitzvah/mitzvot does each story address?  
What is your relationship to each mitzvah?

### Section III.

#### Celebrating Sacred Time: Mitzvot of Shabbat and Holidays

*Page 120 - Light by Yisroel Bernath*

1. What else could the young girl have put in the shack?
2. What does filling the shack with light mean for you?
3. There is a great deal of symbolism in this story. Who do "the king" and "the princess" represent? Do you find other meaningful symbolism in this story? The brothers are happy that their sister succeeded in pushing them off the throne, if this is a symbolic clue; what might the brothers symbolize? The throne?
4. Recall other times that we light candles in Jewish tradition; how is the intention and effect different for each?
5. Shabbat candles are the "hearth of a Jewish home", do you agree?
6. Maimonides is among those who document that Shabbat was originally celebrated and honored with only one candle [Hilchot Shabbat 5:1 and 30:5] We learn that "Both men and women are obligated to have a candle lit in their homes" [Shulchan Aruch, O.C. 263], and in the Mishna Berura that, "The more light is added, the more *shalom bayit* (peace at home) and joy there is as a result of the enjoyment of the light in every corner." Accordingly, in most homes today, at least one set of two candles is kindled to bring in Shabbat. What stories and midrashim have you heard about the reason for lighting two candles, rather than one?
7. How many Shabbat candles do you light in your home? What candlesticks do you use and who gave them to you? What other traditions do you have around candle lighting?



*Page 123 - It's Crowded in My Kitchen by Janie Grackin*

1. Is there a food, aroma, or recipe that reminds you of someone you love?
2. While many generations cook the holiday meal together in our story, today's families often live at great distances from one another. What feelings emerged for you upon reading this story? Does your family make seder together? Are preparations shared?
3. Can you envision yourself teaching a new generation how to cook for and prepare seder? Or, is this something you would like to learn?
4. What are your favorite Passover recipes? How best might you share them with friends, family, or study and book group members?
5. Sometimes it only takes one question to help first-time guests at your seder to feel more welcome; such as everyone sharing about one of their favorite or most unusual seder experiences. What other ideas do you have to make people feel welcome?



*Page 126 - The Wooden Axle by Jill Hammer*

1. How have your experiences fashioned your thoughts about reward and punishment?
2. In olden days, the poor (at least in stories) were often considered more righteous than the rich. Has that changed in our own time? Do you agree? If yes, why do you think that this is so? If not, how do you see the poor portrayed?
3. Sometimes we experience what we consider to be miracles in our lives. How would you define a "miracle"? Share a time you experienced something miraculous.
4. This was not originally a Jewish folk tale. Do you see any problem with one culture appropriating and adapting the stories of another?
5. Rabbi Hammer explains that the woman in her story is the *Shechinah*. As understood in Jewish mysticism, *Shechinah* is feminine, the experience of Divine presence. Have you had such experiences? Do you appreciate or feel challenged by gender variety in God language?



*Page 131 - The Dress: A Purim Fairy Tale by Amichai Lau-Lavie*

1. Would you like to live every day like Purim, acting freely and transforming yourself into what you'd really like to be, without inhibitions?
2. If you could change yourself for just one day, what would you be like?
3. Purim is a rite of reversals: a Jewess becomes queen, for example. What other reversals do you see in the story?
4. On Purim, cross-dressing, aka, costuming as a different gender, is often a local tradition. As a consequence of this tradition, those who have been hidden can appear as themselves. When it is not Purim, how might we help make it possible for those in the GLBTQ spectrum of gender to live fully, as themselves, within Judaism?



*Page 135 - The First Light by Doug Lipman*

1. If you had been granted one use of the Light, what would you have requested from Elijah?
2. Does the revision of this tale fit or conflict with your values?
3. Many Jews are unaware that the classical version of the Hanukkah story depicts Mattathias, not a Greek soldier, as slaying the first Jew who follows the occupying Syrio-Greek regime's order to bow down before an idol. In your opinion, was this death necessary?
4. The story of the Maccabees does not appear in Jewish Scripture, but rather in the *Books of the Maccabees*, texts that are not accepted into the Jewish canon. The only Hanukkah story found in a primary Jewish source, is the tale of the little flask of oil that lasted eight nights, which appears in the Mishna. Why would our sages have decided to suppress the story of the Maccabees?



*Page 140 - The Moon's Garment by Cindy Rivka Marshall*

1. Theodore Herzl, the father of secular Zionism stated, "It you will it, it is not a legend\*," meaning you can make it happen. How does this verse apply to the story?

*\*also often interpreted as "if you will it, it is no dream."*

2. Was Leiba's success due more to persistence or openness to insights and ideas?

3. Leiba inspired the other women to create the garment for the moon. Was there someone who inspired *you* to work on a project?

4. In Jewish culture and many others, the sun is viewed as masculine and the moon as feminine. Often, they are portrayed as rivals, and the moon as lesser, because her light is the reflected light of the sun. How do you view male/female relationships?

5. In this story, the sun is somewhat supportive, but not helpful. Can you give examples when men's support benefited women and vice versa?



*Page 145 - A Story from My Teacher, Abraham Joshua Heschel retold by Jack Riemer*

1. Were you surprised/shocked by the ending of this story? Why?

2. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (zl) is remembered with great respect; for his teachings and also, for his civil rights activism. Do you respect him more, or less, for the teaching about Jewish law revealed in this story?

3. The stories in the Torah about our ancestors, present them not as saints, but as human beings with both strengths and failings. How do you feel about this?

4. Aristotle wrote, "All men by nature desire to know." Why did Heschel's mother fear his desire to learn Polish? Do you agree with her concern and have related concerns in your own life?

5. There were rabbis who ruled that no one should study Kabbalah until one is married and has attained the age of forty. When, if ever, do you think knowledge is dangerous?

6. Do you think the Chassid was right to provide the money? Did he break Jewish law? Apply it properly? Or transform it?

7. Can only a learned, pious person change accepted Jewish norms and Jewish law, or can a "regular" person do so, as well?



*Page 147 - The Hanukkah Menorahs that Could Not Be Lit by Barbara Rush*

1. Do you believe coincidences just "happen"? Tell a story about a "strange" coincidence that happened to you or someone you know.

2. Do you believe that things happen for a reason? Was what happened in this story, *b'shert*, as we say in Yiddish, "meant to be"? In your view, what is synchronicity?

3. Sometimes objects, even inexpensive ones, have deep meaning for their owners. What is the object to which you are most attached? Explain why. Are there Jewish ritual objects or books that you cherish?

4. After the Holocaust, virtually miraculous reunifications took place between family members and friends for years there-after. Do you have such a story to share?

5. How do you feel about this teacher, or any teacher, bringing students to his/her home for an evening?

6. How did the students benefit from the exchange of stories about these treasured objects?



*Page 152 - Shabbos Candles by Sandy Eisenberg Sasso*

1. Describe your reaction when the grandfather entered the room and yelled out. Does he have a legitimate perspective?

2. Come up with a group list of the three most important beliefs/values that a couple needs to discuss before marriage.

3. What compromises would you make to keep the peace in your home? What compromises would you not be willing to make?

4. Have you faced conflict about the practice of Judaism in your home or extended family? How would you have handled the situation posed by Rabbi Sasso?
5. Was the grandfather's attitude abusive? Is it acceptable for relatives to skip a major family rite of passage on ideological grounds?
6. What stops a person from reporting abuse and/or seeking help? Where can an abused woman best turn for information and help in your community? What more can we do?
7. If you could choose to meet someone who died before you were born, or when you were too young to remember, whom would you pick?
8. Share a favorite story about a deceased relative that illuminates a mitzvah or Jewish issue in your family system.



*Page 155 - Queen Esther's Joy by Naomi Steinberg*

1. What was empowering about the poor man's obsession with Purim? How did you feel about it?
2. Why was playing Esther appealing to him?
3. Have you ever felt that you were channeling the spirit of someone, as the main character did? If you feel comfortable, share this experience with the group.
4. Throughout the ages, masks have been a part of dramas and celebrations. Why do you think this is so?
5. What "masks" do you recognize that you wear in your everyday life? As a Jew?
6. Do you have certain roles that you are called upon that bring you great pride and joy?
7. Do you think people ever relate to God in the way that this community related to the main character? Explain.
8. Which Jewish holiday is your favorite and why?



*Page 160 - The Shabbat Story I Want to Tell by Arthur Strimling*

1. What's your reaction to this story? Do any judgments arise?
2. The author uses the memory of going to the movies as a youth to communicate his passion for Shabbat; what memory would you draw on to express the flavor of feeling you wish to attain on Shabbat?
3. What does the author mean by a "boundaried" Shabbat world?
4. How do you feel about, and how have you coped with, different levels of Shabbat observance in your family (or close friends) past and present?
5. Describe your ideal Shabbat. How is it different, or not, from your real experience?
6. What impedes and what enhances your Shabbat experience?



*Page 164 - The Magic Gourd: A Story for Sukkot by Debra Gordon Zaslow*

1. Many folk tales share motifs common across cultures. Brainstorm other stories with the same theme. How are they similar? How are they different?
2. Share a time you "got what you wished for" and it was a disappointment. Explain why.
3. What is the difference between wishing and praying?
4. Imagine a different ending — that the old couple did make a final wish. What would you have this wish be?
5. What makes this story a "love story?"
6. What helps couples move through difficult times? What is needed to renew the holiness and health of committed relationships?
7. The gourd retained its power, even after its real purpose was no longer known. What else is like that in Judaism? In your personal life?

*Page 168 - Rina and the Exodus by Jennifer Rudick Zunikoff*

1. The author has given a greater voice to women using the Jewish tradition of creating a "midrash," a new, or expanded, version of a sacred story. Where might you wish to add women's voices within Jewish text and tradition?
2. At the seder, we diminish our joy because of the Egyptian's suffering, by removing some wine from our glasses with a finger tip, or spoon. Can you think of other times in history that a well-needed victory for one side, caused pain for another?
3. The narrator of the story, at first, expresses to Miriam that she is not ready to leave Egypt. Have you ever felt unready for an experience, especially a transformational one?
4. What was the role of music in the story? When, and which kinds of music move you deeply?
5. Imagine writing a newspaper (or blogging) on one of the days of the Exodus. What headlines and stories would you want to include?
6. Has a determined, optimistic person ever inspired you to do something you were initially reluctant to do?
7. In the Shabbat Kiddush we are reminded to fulfill two *mitzvot*, one is the theme of this story. The other is *zeycher maasei bereishit*, "remembering what happened at the beginning," or literally, the creation story in Genesis. How might recalling these two things help us sanctify Shabbat?



Which mitzvah/mitzvot does each story address?  
What is your relationship to each mitzvah?

**Section IV.**  
**Seasoning Our Lives: Mitzvot of Life Cycle and Learning**

*Page 176 - Honor by Phil Cohen*

1. Discuss how the absence of grief was itself a deep grief for the man.
2. If you had a difficult relationship with a parent, was this story hard for you to read, or comforting?
3. Did you yearn for something from a parent that you did not receive? How has this affected your relationship with this parent? Your life overall?
4. Do you think that, at some point, we need to accept the limitations of a parent? At what point?
5. How can/should we honor an abusive parent?
6. Would you say Kaddish for a surrogate parent?
7. For parents/guardians: How do we reconcile our notion of an ideal parent, with the parent we have been?
8. The paragraph after the Shema says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might." Nowhere in the Torah or Jewish tradition are we commanded to love our parents, only to honor them. Why do you think this is the case?



*Page 181 - Mikveh by Anita Diamant*

1. If people in your discussion group have not been to a *mikveh*, it would be advantageous/helpful to schedule a tour. Following the visit, discuss how you felt, especially if anything surprised you.
2. When you hear or say the word "water", what qualities do you associate with it?
3. Why do you imagine the woman in this interview thinks her friends would find her *mikveh* visits weird?
4. How do you think the woman's monthly immersion in a *mikveh* has enhanced her marital experience?
5. Although in this interview, the woman's immersion is in preparation for love-making, a *mikveh* is used for other purposes: conversion, to heal from illness or trauma, or to spiritually prepare for Shabbat or a holiday. If you have ever been to a *mikveh*, or undertaken one out in nature, and are comfortable talking about it, share a *mikveh* memory or explain what it meant or means to you.



*Page 184 - The Bar Mitzvah – A Ghost Story by Ed Feinstein*

1. Why was it so important to Rabbi Akiva to have the stranger sit with him?
2. Who were the stranger's "masters"?
3. Why was Rabbi Akiva so determined to ease the stranger's pain, even if the man himself had accepted the punishment?
4. How are some children, and even adults today, treated because of the "sins of the parents"?
5. How might we engage in efforts to atone for, or repair damage, done by our ancestors?
6. In your opinion, what does a child need to learn and experience in order to have a meaningful Jewish life?



7. If you were to spend a little time in the week ahead with someone out of your "comfort zone" to hear his/her story, have you any idea whom might you select?



*Page 188- The Eternal Hand by Mark S. Golub*

1. Why did the princess go to meet her friend at the big rock?
2. Do you think that people of different social strata can marry and overcome their differences? What challenges do they face?
3. What does a committed relationship really require of each member of the couple, that you feel those getting married don't really take sufficiently into consideration?
4. If you could give one piece of advice to a couple getting married, what would it be?
5. There are seven blessings at the end of a traditional Jewish wedding. You might bring them for discussion. What blessings would you want to confer upon those entering a committed relationship?



*Page 192 - Men On Menses by James Stone Goodman 192*

1. Is the relationship between fathers and daughters inherently different from the relationship between mothers and daughters? If you think so, then how and why?
2. How would this story be different, if it involved a mother and daughter?
3. For those with both sons and daughters, how is your relationship different with each gender?
4. For fathers: Would you have been able to help your daughter as the author did? Why or why not? What is your opinion of the father and how he handled things?
5. What are the qualities of this father-daughter relationship that made it effective?

6. Not everyone is blessed with the spontaneity and creativity of this father, and the openness and self-assurance of his daughter. What alternative rituals do you know of, or imagine, for this occasion?

7. In this story, the father created a ritual for his teen's daughter's menses. What rituals have you done, heard of, or would you create for the onset of menses, and other little-ritualized, yet important life-cycle events? e.g., learning to read, losing a tooth, getting a drivers license, going off to college, onset of menopause, earning a doctorate, etc.?



Page 195 - *Chayala, Give Me A Smile-a* by Eva Grayzel

1. Is there a teacher you particularly remember? Why?

2. Chaya wasn't use to saying *brachot*, blessings, in her home and felt at a disadvantage. Have you ever felt disadvantaged in Jewish practice? What happened and how did you navigate your situation?

3. Discuss what it must be like for immigrants today not speaking the language of their new country. Do you have ancestors who dealt with this challenge? What do you know of how they did, or did not, learn the language of their new land?

3. Have you ever felt different from all the other people around you? Why? Do you think that everybody, at some point in life, experiences the feeling of not fitting in?

4. If you have ever felt like an outsider, how does this inform who you are today? Which mitzvot help this sense of isolation to be eased?

5. Do you say *brachot*? If not, would you like to add *brachot* to your practice?

6. The main character reveals that she is uncomfortable with the way Rabbi Reshevsky dresses. Have you been in such a position? How did you deal with this?

7. Is it fair to place children in a school where they do not fit because where what is taught will not be practiced at home? Or, do you think that a child can grow from such an experience?

8. What healthy and unhealthy ways have teachers attempted to help you feel visible and special, worthwhile and welcome?

*Page 199 - If My Wedding Dress Could Talk by Bonnie Greenberg*

1. Articles with titles like, "My Life In Dresses", appear frequently in women's magazines. How do women (especially, but not exclusively) associate memory with the clothes worn on special occasions?
2. What Jewish values were expressed by revising the dress?
3. Do you have a garment that you think has a tale to tell?
4. Some women and some men are "into" clothes, or shoes, or jewelry (or all of the above!) Others could not care less about what they wear. Where are you on the spectrum? Do you feel that an emphasis on beauty adds or deters from spirituality?



*Page 203 - Floating Lovers by Tina Grimberg*

1. Chagall's floating lovers appear to be totally absorbed with each other and oblivious to the world around them. This state of being is usually associated with young love. As the author writes, "This is what happens when you fall in love, right?" What could falling in love mean for an elderly couple?
2. What is the difference between falling and growing in love? In your opinion, what kept the couple's love so strong? Do you see their love as typical or rare?
3. Ludmilla and Yosief lived under the oppressive rule of the former Soviet Union. What information and stories can you relate about Jewish life during that period?
3. What did Ludmilla do to feel Jewish? What do you do that helps you feel Jewish?
4. Do you believe that a shared practice is sufficient, or do you feel that conversion is necessary to become part of the Jewish people?
5. Is being buried next to a beloved important to you?

*Page 206 - The Lion of Yerushalayim by Sharona Margolin Halickman*

1. How was the author's birthing story similar or different from yours, or those you've heard?
2. Do you find the idea of giving birth in Israel appealing?
3. The author begins the story with a superstitious behavior - biting off the *pitom*, (tip of the etrog) to make her delivery easier. She also recites a relevant *techinah*, a prayer designed for women. For you, what is the difference between superstition and prayer?
4. Do you have superstitious habits?
5. Share the meaning and derivation of your name. Do your name(s) fit? Jewish sacred names can be changed or added to by being called to the Torah in a new name. Have you changed, or considered changing your secular or sacred name(s)? What are creative ways you can imagine for selecting a sacred name for an infant? For yourself?
6. If you had had a son born during Hanukkah, would you have considered the name "Judah Maccabee?"
7. Does the story resonate with you? The author's life seems fully immersed in living as a Jew. What percentage of your life would you say is Jewish?



*Page 213 - A Teacher by Syd Lieberman*

1. Think about your career choices. Describe someone who helped you along the way, or memorably validated one of your choices.
2. In your opinion, should Ducharme actually have critiqued the author after each lesson?
3. Do you think the master teacher was able to give the student teacher what he needed because of his experience, or his instincts?
4. Do you think the profession of teaching is more of a science, a craft, or an art?

5. Have you ever been traumatized by a teacher? What do you believe were the consequences?

6. Share a story, if you have one, about being thoughtfully helped by a teacher.

6. Have you, or your children, had teachers who memorably, negatively or positively, influenced your Jewish connection, or practices? Share a helpful vignette that comes to mind.



*Page 216 - Permission to Leave by Melvin Metelits*

1. How would you have answered the question "How will I know when it is OK to leave?"

2. Why do you think Howie needed permission to die?

3. There are different circumstances with each death; some may incline us to want to hold on to our loved ones, in others, we are able to let them know it is OK to go. If you have ever been with a dying person, what was the experience like for you? Has the centrality or intensity of this memory shifted over time?

4. What did you learn from your experience(s) with the dying that you would like to pass on to others, especially those who have not yet been with a dying person?

5. What did you think of Reb Marcia's answer, "The soul has a way of letting the body know?" Can you elaborate on what you think she means?

6. We traditionally pray the *Shema* during services, before sleep, and when death is imminent. *Shema* means "listen," and the word *Adonai*, means Lord and shares the Hebrew root *eh-dehn*, which means both windowsill and threshold. For what might a departing soul listen, as it crosses the threshold of this life?



*Page 218 - A Kiss Divine by Steve Nathan*

1. What might be Moses' professional regrets, as well as his personal ones?
2. If you were to reflect on your life up until now, what would your regrets be?
3. In this story, Gershon receives his father's *vidui*, confession, that he was an inattentive parent. What confession would you wish to have heard or wish to hear in the future from a parent? Are there things you might want to confess to your child/ren?
4. What helped Gershon develop a deeper, and more forgiving, understanding of the leadership role of his father?
5. How do you interpret the phrase, "the voice of God"?
6. How do you interpret the phrase, "the kiss of God"?
7. Why was, and is, it important that the location of Moses' grave is not known?
8. It is traditional for family and friends to honor the deceased by helping to shovel earth into the grave. Have you done this? Do you recommend participating in this mitzvah? What are other Jewish traditions help us to honor the dead? Which do you personally feel are important?



*Page 225 - Why I Volunteer by Caren Neile*

1. Have you ever been a volunteer? Describe a volunteer experience that you think will be inspiring for those present.
2. Could you ever be a hospice volunteer? What impedes, or propels you in this direction?
3. The hospice volunteer sang all the way home. What gave her this unexpected joy?
5. Some who are dying inspire us by how they face death. Others seem to have a more difficult death. What factors might contribute to how one behaves in his or her last days?

*Page 229 - Every One Is a Story by Yoel Perez*

1. How does the story leave you feeling about the author?
2. Brainstorm questions a storyteller or speaker might be well advised to ask upon being booked to teach or perform, to help him/her prepare before presenting to a group.
3. Are there persons with disabilities among the groups to which you belong who need adjustments to the program or environment in order to be able to participate fully? Does a group leader have any obligation to draw the presenter's attention to these matters in advance?
4. Would you welcome the ways in which the storyteller attempted to communicate with and engage those present? What other techniques might he have used to engage his audience?
5. Have you ever been in a situation where no matter what you did, there was little or no response? How did you handle this?
6. The storyteller took a risk by addressing the doorman, which resulted in an unexpected, yet fortunate result. Do you think his question was worth the risk?
7. Members of groups often consciously, or unconsciously, discourage individuals with subtle disabilities from future participation. Offer examples. How might we do better?



*Page 231 - Serach bat Asher — A Midrashic Monologue retold by Peninnah Schram*

1. Why did the brothers ask Serach bat Asher to reveal the news of Joseph being alive to their father, Jacob, rather than one of them doing so, or telling him all together?
2. What mitzvah did Serach perform that merited Jacob's blessing her to live forever?
3. What is the "power of song"?
4. Is it important to listen to elders, as they recount their experiences? Why? Are there honorable ways to handle excessive repetitions?

5. Have you encountered "Serach bat Ashers" in your life? (i.e. an elder who holds precious information and stories that help to preserve and shed light upon family and even historical events from his/her lifetime, and may also have been passed on from prior generations.)

6. Are there family stories that you pass along? Do challenges to honorably doing so come up? How might we teach the young about this practice?



*Page 237 - Chutzpah Awakening by Carla Vogel*

1. Elders within Western societies are often not as respected, or valued, as in other parts of the world. Why do you think that is?

2. The elderly often say things to us that we would not accept from others. Have you ever received advice from an older person that was especially helpful?

3. In this story the author questions whether she could have lived her life another way. What major decision(s) in your life have you questioned?

4. "Woulda coulda, shoulda" We all second-guess our choices. When is it beneficial to reconsider our paths, and when might this be detrimental?

5. Do you believe that everyone needs a beloved, as well as good friends?

6. We may wish a loving relationship for someone about whom we care. Is it necessary to pressure a Jewish person to seek a committed relationship?

7. What is the author's "chutzpah awakening"? How might this have contributed to her finding love?





Which mitzvah/mitzvot does each story address?  
What is your relationship to each mitzvah?

### Section V.

#### Finding Holiness & Happiness: Mitzvot of Serving & Experiencing God

Page 244 - *Tied Together and Worlds Apart: A Holism Story in Three Parts* by Barry Bub

1. Is the diversity of Jewish practice in our times good for the Jews? Do you find yourself able to relate to those at a distant part of the spectrum of practice from your own? Is it important to do so, or not?
2. What do you think all Jews have in common?
3. In the e-mail exchange in the story, how does the definition of holiness differ? Which definition resonates with you?
4. Would you appreciate being approached on the street about doing a Jewish practice? Have you ever encountered a Jewish outreach worker? If so, what was the experience like for you? Also describe any long-term effects. Why was the author's encounter in Venice a disappointment to him?
5. What made the author's encounter in Tzefat more satisfying for him?
6. What are crucial elements for dialogue across the broad spectrum of Jewish life?
7. Have you had experience with tefillin? Does it help your experience of prayer and contemplation? What traditions do you know about tefillin? If you have never donned tefillin, would you want to have an experience with this mitzvah?
8. Would you agree that in Tzefat holiness truly happened? Why or why not? Does it matter whether the young Hassid in Tzefat actually ever reads *Man's Search for Meaning*?



*Page 248 - The Kabbalah of Laundry by Dan Gordon*

1. When you travel, are you more of a spontaneous person or an organized traveler, with a Plan B?
2. Why did the time at the condo in Vail, Colorado not seem very satisfying to the author?
3. How do you think you might have reacted to the stranger?
4. Did you think the choice of reciting the Priestly Blessing was a good one? Can you suggest another option?
5. The author seems to suggest that everything that happened was *b'shert*, Divine Providence. Do you believe that everything happens for a reason?
6. Do you have a "Laundromat story" to tell?



*Page 253 - The Taxi by Dan Grossman*

1. Do you ever stop and give rides to people, or accept rides from strangers? How has this worked out for you?
2. Mahmud refers to his grandfather and the rabbi as "friends." How would you describe their relationship?
3. What boundaries, besides war, kept these two people apart?
4. Today, what boundaries do you think need to be broken? Which need to be kept or safeguarded?
5. What touched you about Mahmud's act of kindness? Did any part of the story make you uncomfortable?
6. Imagine that the old rabbi was still alive. Recreate the end of the story.

7. How might the story be different if, instead of in 1971, the story took place in the present?

8. Reaching across generations to old connections and memories, who would you want to call or visit today?



*Page 257 - These Are Your Laws by Miriam Grossman*

1. In what ways does the integration of Jews into North American society, and the issues we face due to assimilation, compare with the experience and issues of the Native American population?

2. Which argument against building the school on the burial site touched you the most?

3. Like the author, Jews have often thought we are not responsible because we were not there when atrocities against Native Americans were perpetrated; in reality there are continuing problems that we can address. Can you think of other situations in our country and the world to which this applies?

4. Why was the offer the Federal agent made so insulting? Why did it infuriate the author?

5. Should Tim have shaken the hand of the agent? Should the author's grandmother have allowed the (imaginary) Cossack into her house?

6. Must forgiveness trump justice, or is justice needed, too? How do we balance the two?

7. Are there lessons from the Jacob and Esau story that apply here?

8. Can there be reconciliation without a just solution?

9. In your community do you add prayer for other peoples to your liturgy? Does your social action committees address matters that affect other peoples, as well? Or does your community focus only upon the well being of the Jewish people? Where do you stand on this?

*Page 262 - Working Together by Fred Guttman*

1. Have you ever considered making *aliyah* (settling in the land of Israel)?
2. Do you have family members who live in Israel? How would you feel if some of your family decided to make *aliyah*?
3. Why are some Jewish people very attached to the State of Israel, and other Jews are not?
4. Compare your life to what you know, or imagine, life is like for your Israeli counterpart.
5. Is compulsory service to one's country something you value? What exemptions are important?
6. What lessons did the author learn?
7. Would you be willing to serve in the Israeli military or volunteer corps, if Israel direly needed you? If not, would you act in some way to help from where you live?



*Page 265 - The Escort by Benji Levene*

1. What emotional reactions did you have to this story?
2. What aspects of the history and setting involved were new to you? What would you like to learn more about in connection with this story?
3. Do you agree with the statement: "All we take from this world is our good deeds"? How does such thinking affect you?
4. Our sages teach, *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, "one mitzvah increases another". One interpretation is that doing a mitzvah encourages us to do other mitzvot. Is this true? If yes, why do you think this happens? Have you experienced this in your own life?
5. Is there a mitzvah you would like to "take on" for the first time? Is there a mitzvah that you would like to make your special mitzvah? Is so, why that one in particular?
6. Another interpretation of *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, is that when we do a mitzvah, we can deepen our commitment to that mitzvah. If a person chooses to make "escorting" others his/her special mitzvah, we would not expect him, or her, to immediately escort prisoners

to their death. It is suggested that we take one step at a time. Has something you, or someone you know, begun in a small way, and grown into a major mitzvah-centered initiative, or non-profit?

7. Yet another interpretation of *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, is that a mitzvah can set off a chain of mitzvot, influencing others to carry out this and, possibly other mitzvot. Both the author and the woman were influenced to do a special mitzvah by someone fulfilling this mitzvah for them. Has someone influenced you to do a mitzvah by setting an example?

8. Will your descendants think of you as someone who did mitzvot? What do you hope people will remember about you?



*Page 269 - Playing Monopoly with Melvin by Herb Levine*

1. When you first read the word "Monopoly" where you concerned about what would happen when they played the game? Why?

2. How does homelessness happen? How can we help someone be less likely to lose his, or her, residence?

3. Why was this synagogue's approach to helping homeless families such a special mitzvah?

4. Do you live your life more like Sarah, or Melvin?

5. On some level, we all try to "stay in the game of life." What does that phrase mean to you?



*Page 271- The God of Curried Fish by Goldie Milgram*

1. Take some time to reflect on the various feelings and thoughts that co-exist when encountering a jobless or homeless person. Then share these with the group.

2. Have you ever been in such a "dicey" or dangerous neighborhood? How did you handle

being in such a location? Did this experience affect your point of view?

3. How would you have answered Reggie's \$30 billion dollar question?

4. Analyze the rabbi's responses to Reggie. How did she help effective communication to become possible?

5. Do you think that prayer in a situation like this is valuable? Did the rabbi's prayer for this man seem to be meaningful beyond helping him find a job?

5. Who else do you think, besides the jobless man, was touched by the rabbi's prayer? Were you?



*Page 276 - Being a Wrestler with God by Peter Pitzele*

1. "Doesn't God already know what we need?" What do you think?

2. Name the "angels" who have changed your perspective on life.

3. Was it important to God that Jacob become a God-wrestler?

4. Have you ever wrestled with God? What was the outcome?

5. Is there a difference between God loving us and missing us?

6. Compare Rabbi Shapiro's story, which is a modern midrash, with the original text of Genesis Chapter 3. How are the two versions similar and how are they different? Which do you prefer?



*Page 281 - Whitewater by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi*

1. Were you more drawn to the story of the whitewater adventure, or the explanation of the loom?
2. If our freedom is no more than an illusion, does that make us less motivated to either make wise choices or behave ethically? Does it strip our lives of meaning?
3. Is God is with us in the still waters? In the rushing waters? What does this mean to you?
4. In the High Holiday prayer, *Ki Hinei KaChomer*, we say, "Surrender us and we yield to you, please make us feel." What does yielding accomplish?
5. Can there be both Divine Providence and free will? Is the story effective in addressing this question?



*Page 288 - The Dead Sea by Howard Schwartz*

1. Do you believe in "angels?" Explain how you interpret this word.
2. Describe any of your feelings that arose in response to the four brief paragraphs of this story.
3. This very short story is densely packed with Jewish spiritual metaphors. What do these metaphors represent? The journey? The sinkholes? The rock? The young man? The bus?
4. The Hebrew name for the Dead Sea is *Yam HaMelach*, "Sea of Salt." Which name do you prefer? Why?
5. If you have ever been to the Dead Sea, describe your experience.
6. Can you briefly and symbolically, as in this story, describe a major point in your life?



*Page 289 - The Surprising Ones by Rami Shapiro*

1. How do you feel about the anthropomorphism in the story?
2. In this midrash, Eve's eating of the fruit was a heroic act. She was the first mutant. Most pre-feminist commentators interpret the Biblical Eve's disobedience as a sin. Which interpretation resonates with you?
3. There are those who view Eve as heroic because she wanted the wisdom to understand good and evil. The consequence of her act was not so much a punishment, as a step into adulthood. Can you write a midrash with this interpretation? This can be done individually or, as a shared group activity. When complete, share and discuss what the process of writing a midrash was like for you.
4. Do you feel that lack of surprise can destroy us? Can too much surprise ever be a problem?
5. What did you think of Sophia's surprising suggestion? Was it worth a try?



*Page 295 - The Elevator that Wouldn't Go by Shohama Harris Wiener*

1. If you were in a situation such as this stuck elevator, who would you want to be with you?
3. Does prayer really help in this situation, or, was Reb Zalman trying to be humorous?
4. What do you believe is the purpose of prayer?
5. Compose a prayer for being stuck in an elevator.
5. Imagine the class on prayer that followed at the seminary. What do you think was discussed?





**Resources from Reclaiming Judaism Press**

**Mitzvah Cards: One Mitzvah Leads to Another**

52 Professionally Printed Cards in a Matching Box

**Mitzvah Stories: Seeds for Inspiration and Learning**

Edited by Goldie Milgram and Ellen Frankel  
with Peninnah Schram, Cherie Karo-Schwartz, Arthur Strimling  
and 60 Contributing Authors

**Mitzvah Stories Podcasts**

Model Mitzvah Projects and Inspiring Mitzvah Stories

**Seeking and Soaring: Jewish Approaches to Spiritual Direction**

Edited by Rabbi Goldie Milgram with 30 Contributing Authors

**Turn-key Mitzvah Stories Retreats  
and Scholar-in-Residencies**

**Hundreds of Free Mitzvah-Centered Teachings**

On-line at our website

**[www.ReclaimingJudaism.org](http://www.ReclaimingJudaism.org)**



Innovative Resources for Meaningful Jewish Living