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When Aesop Became a Jew, 1982.

When Aesop Became A Jew Daniel Jeremy Silver May 2, 1982

A few weeks ago I sent off the page proofs of my book on Moses and the Jewish tradition and it was time to think of another book and so I contracted with the publishers to present them in a few years a book on storytelling and storytellers among Jews, a history of storytelling among our people. So from time to time you're going to hear about this or that storyteller or this or that type of story. They reveal, of course, a great deal of the inner meaning of the basic thrust of Jewish life so they're not unwelcome here as elements from the pulpit, and the first of these approaches is this morning. I want to talk to you about the fable as it has been used in our Jewish tradition.

Dr. Johnson, he of the dictionary fame, described the fable as a narrativin which beings irrational, and sometimes inanimate, are for purposes of moral instruction feigned to act and speak with human interests and passions. In other words,
a fable is a story in which animals or objects are personified and they speak with
and act as if they were human beings and, presumably, we are to derive some kind of
moral instruction from the fable. A fable is not simply a story. It's a story with
a point, a story with a bit of moral instruction, a tagged line added on to it.

One of the most famous of the fables which appear in the Talmud tells of a fox who was walking along the side of a river and he noticed the fish darting this way and darting that way as fish do, and he said to the fish, why are you so busy moving this way and that way, what are you fleeing from. And the fish said, we are moving this way and that, fleeing from the nets of men. And the fox said to the fish, but why don't you come up with me on to dry land, here you won't have to fear the nets of men. And the fish answered the fox, if we are in danger in our natural element, how much more so we will be in danger in an element which is obviously fatal to us.

When the legendary Greek writer of legends, Aesop, first put down this fable, the message was don't be a fish out of water, stay in your natural environment. In the Talmud this fable is told by Akiba, one of the great rabbis of the

early part of the second century and it's introduced in this way. Just before the Bar Kochba revolt early in the second century the Romans prohibited Jews from practicing Judaism or studying Torah. Akiba and his disciples continued to practice Judaism and to study Torah, and a neighbor, a man named Poppas Ben Judah, came to Akiba and said, how can you do this, how can you endanger your life in this way. Akiba responded with the fable which I've told you and he made as the point of the fable, if as Jews we're endangered by practicing Judaism and studying the Torah, it would be fatal for us if we were to cease practicing Judaism and studying Torah. Our traditions, our values, would all disappear.

And, of course, being a rabbi he couldn't resist adding to the Aesop fable, a Biblical tag line from the book of Deuteronomy: for the Torah is your life and the way which lives life.

Now, a fable exists then for instructional purposes. It codes human actions in the lives of animals or in the relationship between objects, and it almost always ends with what our tradition calls a mashal, a proverb, some statement which makes very clear what its moral point in fact is. Now, these fables, and there are really only several hundred of them in the great classic literature, developed in two main centers: in Greece and in Persia and in India. And they existed, passed on from generation to generation by parents, by grandparents, by friends, uncles, as teachers as they told these fables to children. There is a stage, as you know, in our development when we're three or four when we are convinced that animals talk to us and that animals act just as we do and for the same reasons as we do. But when these stories appear in the literature they are carefully crafted and they exist for some kind of serious purpose. The great French collector and writer of fables, Jean de Lefontaine, said it this way in semi-poetic form:

Fables in sooth are not what they appear.
Our moralists are mice, and such small deer,
We yawn at sermons, but we gladly turn
to moral tales, and so amused learn.

Fables when they appear, then, out of the folk literature are almost always a way to give us some deeper, more significant, point. The Bible has only two fables in it. Clearly, however, the Hebrews and the Israelites had a whole treasury of fables which they passed on in this underground way, unseen way, and one of these fables is of interest because it illustrates the more sophisticated use of the fable when it appears in literature. It appears in Deuteronomic history. It said that when the men of Shehem wanted to find a successor to the man who was their sheik, their caliph, the tribal leader who had died, they looked among all of his sons and they chose one by the name of Abimellah. Now, Abimellah was a crafty and scheming man, and once he had been given authority, kingship, he proceeded to kill all of his brothers save one who escaped. He wanted none who could contend with him for the throne, and that one young brother, a man named Jafam, proceeded to climb up Mount Gorizim which is near Samaria, near Shehem, and to shout out this parable to the people who had elected Abimellah. He told them that once upon a time the trees were looking for a king and the trees went to the olive tree and they said to the olive tree, you be king over us. And the olive tree demurred. I'm busy producing the fruit which produces the oil which lights men's homes, I have no time to be waving myself above other trees. And so the trees took council together and they decided to ask the fig tree to be king over them. And the fig tree also demurred. He was too busy producing the fruit that men eat which they require for their food. He had no time, he said, to be bothered about waving himself hither and you above the other trees. And so they went to the vine and the vine also answered in this way, that he had no time to be king over them, he had to produce the fruit, the grapes which produced the wine which men drank, he had no time to be waving himself above all other trees. And so the trees finally went to the lowly thorn bush and they asked the thorn bush to be king and the thorn bush agreed. And the thorn bush said, I'll be king over you if you're asking this of me honestly, provided you come under my shade and are protected by me, and if you're not honest and

do not come under my shade I will cause a great fire to go out and I will consume you even to the cedars of Lebanon.

Now, in Josem's use the parable clearly contains a rather cynical judgement of kings and of leaders who do nothing but wave themselves hither and you above people who are really doing more important things. And there's also quoted in the conclusion a prophecy about Abimellah. The thorn bush really does not shade anything. You can't be shaded by the thorn bush. You can't be protected by Abimellah. You've put people of Shehem your trust in someone who cannot protect you, but the thorn bush is also the source of a great deal of the fire, the underbrush fire which goes out and spreads and destroys the forest, but Abimellah will be a great source of danger to you.

Now, a fable of this kind is witty and meaningful, but it has no weapons and so the Bible tells us that having spoken to us Jotham fled. In other words, a fable has some power but its power is very limited. And interestingly, over history the fables have been used again and again by people in heavily censored societies because they related the dog, the cat, the fox, the wolf, to particular governors, tax collectors, tyrants, and since these fables were well known to everyone, the censor couldn't say you have no right telling this tale in which the wolf is pillaried as a voracious and cruel and tyrannical animal because, in fact, the man who would be telling the tale would say, I'm simply telling a tale which is told to my grandfather and grandfather told it to you. But in point of fact, the man who was telling the tale knew that his audience knew that the wolf was the particular tyrant of their day and so part of the underground propaganda over time over the oppressed was expressed in many of these fables.

Now, we know that a number of the great rabbis of the classic period, Hillel, Yohanen ben Zakai, Rabbi Mayer, were well known as tellers of tales. We also know that the Jewish tradition, Jewish people played a very special role in the transmission of these tales from the Orient to Europe. Aesop is the legendary

founder of the fabulous tradition in the west, it comes out of Greece. As I said, the other great source of the fables is in Persia and India where you have groups of stories like the jetakak, jetatkah and jatatantra, stories about, particularly fox fables which come out of that part of the world. And the Jews, having contact with both of these societies, absorbed both of these traditions and they were very important in the Jewish tradition and there were a number of anthologies of the tales by the rabbis in Hebrew, and these were brought into Europe and translated in Europe into Latin and the romance languages and it is in that way that most of the fables of the ancient world passed into our modern literature, through the intermediation of Jews of the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries.

And what I'd like to do today is to tell you about one of these men, a man you've probably never heard of before. His name was Barachia ben Natony Hanactan. Barachia ben Natony, the grammarian. Nactan means one who puts little dots and lines under the letters which vocalize them. Now Barach ben Natrony Hanactan lived in the late twelfth and early thirteenth century in Norman, France. We know that he visited England. We have reason to believe that he lived in Oxford for a number of years where he was known as Benedict Lapunctur. Now, he was an educated man as well as a learned Talmudist. He translated a number of the scientific texts of the day from Latin into Hebrew, but he's best known and important to us this morning because of a little collection of fables that he brought together under the title, The Proverbs, The Book of the Fox. There are a hundred or so fables in this little book, written in very precious Hebrew poetic style, full of illusions to Biblical text. This is what Hebraizes, Judaizes, the material, and it's interesting to see as we look, along the text what it is that he does with a text of antiquity because he really works with the material which has been given to him.

Remember the story with which we began, the story of the fox and the fish.

Well, Barachia tells this story but he gives it a different slant, different twist.

The fox walks along the river. The fox talks to the fish. The fish say that

they're moving about here and there because they're trying to escape from bigger fish. And the fox says, well, come up on dry land here, you won't have to worry about the bigger fish. And the fish then answer the fox by saying, if we come up on dry land how can you guarantee our safety because in truth there is always someone more powerful, bigger than any animal you are. It reminds me of that Haggyagah song which we sing on the Pas-sver, then came the dog that bit the cat that ate the kid my father bought for two zizim and only kid and only kid. There's always in this doggerel some animal, some power, greater than the power which is at the moment vaunting itself over a more lowly animal. And, of course, being a pious Jew Barachia says, ultimately there is always one higher than he who thinks himself the highest, and God the most high watches and regards everything. But in the world of which Barachia speaks and to which he relates his fables, in that world it is the world of the jungle. It's the world in which one must not listen to the blandishments of those who tell us throw away your arms, throw away your protection, leave your natural environment, put behind you all your cautions because I will protect you or because this scheme will provide you with security. The fundamental condition of human life in Barachia's fables is that of insecurity and the moral as Barachia tells it is that one ought not to listen to the blandishments of those who promise us peace, justice, the messianic age because until God comes and intervenes, until the Messianic Age comes, one must always recognize the fundamental nature of all that is. And he adds, of course, a quote from Scripture with which to make his point, for the transgression of the land as it has always too many princes.

In Barachia's world there is what is called the wheel of time, the wheel of fate, things never are quite what we want them to be, life never quite works out the way we are. We come up only to go down. The wheel turns. We are healthy, disease. We are for the moment prosperous, poverty. We lose what we have. The gilgul hasman moves on endlessly and there is no ultimate security in the world that he knew.

And remember that his world was the world of the Middle Ages, the world in which

the Jews were tiny little communities in the midst of a vast sea of illiterate, anti-semitic peasants, in the midst of people who were illiterate, who ruled over them, the knights whose code was a code of war and of violence, who made reckless crusades against all others who were not of their faith. Into that world the fables of Barachia Nactan instruct the Jew to be cautious, to be careful, and not to let down his guard.

Now, there are the kinds of fables that we're used to, the fables which give a positive moral instruction, the kind of material which we would like our children to have. But we also remember that from the very beginning, from Aesop on, most of the fables speak of the jungle more than they do of civilization. Perhaps that's why they use the animal as the element. When Herodotus describes Aesop he describes him as a deformed, frijian slave, perhaps a pygmy, that is to say, he was not a full-grown man, civilized, whose form belied his character. He was stunted. He was deformed, and what he taught had a certain stunted quality to it for he taught of the jungle only, of animals, of man and animals, and man is in some way much more than an animal. And so though we find the usual high-minded fables in Barachia, we find there the famous story of the dog who was in the house who sees a piece of cheese on the kitchen counter and he grabs the piece of cheese to run out of the house to enjoy it. And as he is moving out of the garden he crosses a little stream by the garden and he happens to look down off the bridge and he sees his reflection in the river, you know the story, and he sees the other cheese in the river and he says, two cheeses are better than one and he grabs for the second cheese and loses the first in the process.

And there's the story in Barachia of the stag who has a magnificent set of horns. His horns come naturally. He's really not aware of the beauty and the power of his horns, and one day when he's by the slow flowing stream in the forest he happens to look down and he sees these magnificent antlers and he begins to preen himself on the power and the glory which is his. He's the most powerful of

beasts. He's the most beautiful beasts. There's none unlike to him. And hunters pass by and they loose their dogs against the stag and the stag plunges into the forest and his antlers catch in the underbrush, in the bush of the forest. Pride cometh before the fall.

You have those kinds of fables in Barachia, but you also have another kind of fable. You have the fable about the ape, the ape who had two sons. One son was particularly beloved to him and one son he frankly couldn't stand. And the family had a lot of troubles. But one day a leopard began to circle the ape and his two sons and began to go closer and closer. He was obviously about to pounce and in order to protect himself and his beloved son, the father ape devised a scheme. He took the son he didn't like and he threw him on his back and he said when we run I'll be able to toss him off my shoulders to the leopard. The leopard will stop and eat the son I don't like and I and my beloved son, who I will protect between my knees, we will be able to escape. And so he threw the son he didn't like on his back and he took the son whom he loved and he took him on his thighs in front of him to protect him and he began to run and the leopard began to chase and was about to pounce. And when he came to try to take off of his back, to throw to the leopard the son he did not like, the son who was no dummy grabbed on as best he could to the hair of his father. He grabbed this way and he wouldn't let go and the father couldn't reach back and force him loose and he had no alternative if anyone was to escape but to take the som whom he loved in between his knees and toss that son to the leopard in order for at least himself and another to escape. And the escape was made. And the beloved son is lost and Barachia in the fable says that a year has passed and the older man learned to love the son whom he couldn't stand because he was with him and a companion to him and took care of him in his old age. And that's the whole fable. It's not the kind of fable that you'd want to tell a threeyear old lest you give him nightmares, but it does suggest the cold cruel world. It does suggest that fathers and mothers ought not to have a favorite because in time you can never be sure how your favorite will turn out and that the one you don't

like or one you can't stand whose vibrations are not yours will not suddenly be the one who cares for you in your old age. It says something about parental love that in fact part of that love is involved in the fact that these are our immortality, these are our security for future times. There's a certain cruelty to it and a certain cynicism to it, a certain callousness to it, but there's a certain realism, particularly when you remember the world of which Barachia was a part. It's a world which delighted to tell a story of the fox who was walking out one day and he chanced across a very succulent garden. And he went around the garden because it was fenced in, looking for a way to get into the garden. The fence was simply too high for him to be able to bound over, and he found in one of the slats of the fence a hole and he tried to slither through he couldn't make it, he was too fat. And so he fasted for three days and for three nights and then he was able to slither through into the garden and when he got into the garden he feasted for three days and for three nights. And then he began to hear the owner of the garden and his dog approaching and he wanted to get out of the garden and he came to the hole in the fence, but he was again too fat, and he had no alternative but to hide himself in the corner of the garden and fast again for three days and three nights before he could escape into freedom.

Now, the fable is first told in the name of Aesop, and when Aesop tells the tale the moral is that time takes care of everything. When Barachiah tells the tale the garden is a symbol of life, the fox slithering through the narrow hole of the garden is birth, the fox leaving the garden is death. We come in with danger. We leave without anything. Naked came I out of my mother's womb and naked I shall return there. It becomes a vivid illustration of the Biblical text and it says something about not caring too much about the things of this world. They are attractive, they are succulent, they are good, but we can't take them with us. And ultimately, in old age we have to give up all of the fatness of our youth.

So, in Barachia you come across a world which is full of uncertainty,

a world in which cooperation is necessary for survival but almost impossible to maintain. He tells the fable about four oxen. These four oxen watched their parents and their grandparents and they saw how one by one they were picked off by the lions and the leopards, and so the oxen made a covenant of fellowship. They would always be together. They would always watch the four corners. They would see when danger came. And if they kept their vigil no one could successfully attack them. And day after day, week after week, they kept this compact, and a lion saw this quartet of oxen and they were fat and they were sleek and he began to want to enjoy them and he began to follow after the quartet, but they were careful. He was not able to attack until, finally, one day he decided he had a system and he began to call out at night to one of the four oxen, a special one. And he began to tell him slander about the other three, that they really were conspiring against him, that if any attack would come they had determined he was the one who would be the scapegoat, the sacrificial ox, and ultimately the lion said to this ox, your only chance is really to escape, leave them alone, and I'll be able to go after the three of them and you'll be the one who will go scot free. And the ox was induced and seduced and he walked away from the other three and the lion pounced and the lion ate and the bellowing of the three who were left behind could not save the ox who walked away. Fellowship is the only way of survival, but fellowship requires trust and trust does not come easily to the human beast.

There is a line in the Sayings of the Fathers which we read today, was it not for the fear of government the weak would be swallowed by the strong. That was the kind of world in which Barachia lived, that only enforced security. Security was rare then and unstable. It was a time when one had to be careful always of one's self, take care of one's self and protect one's self. The wolf came down to the river, he was thirsty. And he saw some way down the bank of the river a sheep lapping at the water. And the wolf turned to the sheep and he said, sheep, what are you doing drinking my water. And the sheep said, kind sir, I acknowledge your power,

I have no intention of doing damage to your water, I'm not muddying it up at all, there's plenty of water for all of us. And the wolf said, it's my water and, besides, once upon a time your ancestors wronged me. And the sheep said, kind sir, I'm only a year old, I have not wronged you and I am doing no damage to your water. Fresh water is coming down the stream all the time. I'll leave if I'm in your way. And the wolf pounced, and he killed the lamb, and he ate this lamb. A cruel story, a story which suggests, of course, that flattery, the diplomatic skills of kindness, turning the other cheek, does not in fact always tame the wild beast, that the kind word does not destroy the arrogance of the arrogant, in fact it may make them more arrogant. It was a world in which the Jew knew very well that he was blamed for the acts of his ancestors though he was not involved in them, the charge of deicide which was so much a part of the medieval world. It was a world in which the Jew had to fawn on the local prince even though he was illiterate because he was the prince, he had the arms, and the Jew knew, for all of his fawning, ultimately his life remained insecure. He was in danger of exile or death.

And so these fables are filled with this sense that were it not for the fear of government, for some kind of force, the weak would always be swallowed by the strong, that being weak is no virtue, that turning the other cheek is no way to gain salvation, that one must be cautious and prudential and concerned always and at all times. And that, incidentally, is generally the picture that comes to us when we look through collections of fables and if we're not reading them in some kind of baudlerized form. Fables come out of a time when for most people life was a jungle, when those who lived in the jungle with them were the predatory beasts. The sheep is so often the victim, and the sheep is almost always the person or the people to whom the story is being told. And the predators, the wolf, the lion, the leopard, these are the powers that are above, the powers which cannot be controlled, the powers which can suddenly pounce and maim and kill and destroy.

Now it's interesting, in our time such fables hav been transformed into Walt Disney and the world of Aesop has somehow become the world of Rudyard Kipling's just so stories which is to say that in modern times the fables have become less violent, less cruel, less realistic, and they become children's stories, something they never were in the beginning. It says something about the fact that in modern society there is some due process, there is some trust in government, in justice, there is some control over the powerful which says something about our romantic spirit that even though it is true, as we can all testify from our own experience, that weakness and poverty are not always protected, that we are filled with hope that this in fact may be. And perhaps one of the reasons in adult literature the fables have tended to disappear from off the shelves is to be attributed to the fact that we really don't want to think of the world as a jungle. We'd like to think of it as civilized. We'd like to think that the human being is something more than a human animal and, of course, in fact we are, or at least all of us have the possibility to be. And I would simply leave you with this, that if you find in the years ahead that the fable has come back into its own, it has again become a popular means of literary expression, you can be sure that the sense of insecurity which we now limit to the center city has permeated out into the suburbs where people buy and read the books of fables, and it bespeaks a society which has lost the optimism, the confidence in civilization the last several centuries, a society which psychologically and emotionally feels itself again in a crueler, colder world. In that sense, of course, I would hope that the fable never appears among us as a popular literary form, that so many of the fables are useful as educational and sermonic devices, they're part of the armory of any rabbi, of any teacher, of any parent. They're wonderful to read and think about and it's interesting that when we do to remember that Judaism was taught best by its stories and its fables. Theology was for theologians. The stories and fables were for everyone, and it is through the stories and the fables that we can understand the heart of the people

and it is because of that the history of stories and storytellers is, I think, worth the writing.



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SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
SERVICES 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver will speak on THE NUCLEAR FREEZE MOVEMENT	26	TWA Activities 10:00 a.m Branch Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi Jonathan S. Woll 10:30 a.m.	28	29	30	Shabbat Services 11:30 a.m Branch Bar Mitzvah MARC LEFKOWITZ 11:00 a.m. The Temple Chapel
					Services - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel	
SERVICES 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch Rabbi Daniel Jeremy Silver will speak on WHEN AESOP BECAME A JEW	3	TWA Activities 10:00 a.m Branch Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi Jonathan S. Woll 10:30 a.m. Temple Young Associates Board Meeting 8:00 p.m Branch	HS A	TEMPLE SENIORS 11:00 a.m Branch	FIRST FRIDAY Dr. Philip H. Abelson 8:15 p.m Branch	Shabbat Services 11:30 a.m Branch Bat Mitzvah KAREN BURK 11:00 a.m. The Temple Chapel Bat Mitzvah ALLISON BROOKS 4:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel
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16	17	Last Day TWA Activities 10.00 a.m Branch Fellowship & Study Group Rabbi Jonathan S. Woll 10:30 a.m. Religious School Board Meeting 8:00 p.m Branch	Confirmation Rehearsal 4:15 p.m 6:00 p.m. Main Temple	20	Services - 5:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel SEVENTH SABBATH 8:00 p.m Branch	Shabbat Services 11:30 a.m Branch Confirmation Rehearsal 9:00 a.m Noon Main Temple Last Day Religious Schoo Bat Mitzvah MEREDITH LEVY 11:00 a.m. The Temple Chapel Bar Mitzvah HARRY MADORSKY 4:30 p.m. The Temple Chapel

Friday Evening Service - 5:30 - 6:10 - The Temple Chapel Sabbath Service - 11:15 a.m. - The Branch

WHEN AESOP BECAME A JEW

PRINIEL JEREMY SILVER
will speak on

May 2, 1982 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch THE NUCLEAR FREEZE MOVEMENT

Rabbi DANIEL JEREMY SILVER will speak on

April 25, 1982 10:30 a.m. The Temple Branch

SONDAY MORNING SERVICES

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