



In Your Hands

Jewish Tradition, India, Benin

Many people considered the old rabbi a prophet. Aside from his spiritual qualities, his simplicity and kindness, many of those who followed him claimed to have seen him do extraordinary things, ‘miracles’, some said, while others claimed that he was able to see the future and guess what was in the hearts of people.

One day a wandering preacher arrived in the community. This man was tired of meandering back and forth, so he decided to settle down and follow a more peaceful life. He could have become a successful street market charlatan, selling elixirs or unnecessary gadgets. But he had decided, from a young age, that he wanted to bring souls back to their Creator, albeit without having to go through the hardships of study and erudition required to become a rabbi. The problem was that he was used to having everyone listen carefully to him in the public squares, and to people valuing his words above those of other so-called ‘quacks’.

However, it did not take long for him to realise that the people of the community preferred to listen to the old rabbi instead of him. This was to the point of him feeling eclipsed in the presence of the old man, ignored by all who only had ears for the elder’s words.

He was so mortified by his irrelevance and invisibility within the community after so many years being the centre of attention that, finally, his heart became clouded and sour. So he began to devise ways in which the people of the community would come to understand that he had much more to offer than the older man.

On account of the fame of the old rabbi who was a prophet and seer, the preacher devised a devious plan to discredit him and, incidentally, make himself look like the one who had unmasked the supposed righteous man. He planned to buy a song bird from the market and present himself before the old rabbi and his audience with the bird well-hidden behind his back. Furthermore, he planned to say to him, in front of everyone, ‘Rabbi, I have a little bird in my hands. I am sure that you, who know everything, can answer this question with certainty: “Is this bird alive, or is it dead?”’ If the old man replied that it was alive, the preacher would break its neck without anyone noticing and present it as dead to the audience. If the old man replied that it was dead, all he had to do was show it to everyone, release it and let it fly away. His plan could not fail!

The next morning he went to the market and, as he had planned, he bought a goldfinch from a merchant from the southern mountains. Later, in the afternoon, he appeared before the old rabbi and his followers with the bird securely held in his hands and hidden behind his back. Then he said, as he had planned, and had repeated, over and over, the night before:

‘Rabbi, I have a little bird in my hands. I am sure that you, who know everything, can surely answer this question: “Is the bird alive or is it dead?”’

The old man looked him straight in the eye, and with deep sadness, and that look left the preacher profoundly confused.

‘That, my dear friend, is in your hands’ –the old man finally answered– ‘It depends exclusively on you.’

The young rabbi was deeply ashamed and, pulling the small goldfinch out from behind his back, he released it, in full view of everyone. He then sat down, in the last row of the audience, and was to become the humblest of the old rabbi’s disciples. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2020).

Under license Creative Commons CC BY-NC-SA.



Comments

This story has become an archetype of the human collective unconscious. This is because it can be found in various forms and in many places in the continental mass that makes up Asia, Africa and Europe. According to Dan Keding (2008), there are versions of this story in the Jewish tradition and also in Africa, specifically in Benin (Mama, 2006), while Margaret MacDonald (2005) offers us a version from India.

This alone is an indication of the universal value of the profound teaching of this story. It highlights, with an image and a metaphor, the decisive importance of taking responsibility for everything we do, but, above all, for everything we have yet to do, and also the importance being able to choose our course of action. This is something that the Earth Charter stresses in its text on at least three occasions (please, see below).

Sources

Feldman, C & Kornfield, J. (1991). *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*. New York: HarperCollins.

Keding, D. (2008). In your hands. In *Elder Tales: Stories of Wisdom and Courage from Around the World* (p. 8). Wesport, CT: Libraries Unlimited.

MacDonald, M. (2005). In your hands. In *Earth Care: World Folktales to Talk About* (p. 124). Little Rock: August House.

Mama, R. (2006). *Why Monkeys Live in Trees and Other Stories from Benin*. Evanston, IL: Curbstone Books.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: The Challenges Ahead.- The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise.

Preamble: Universal Responsibility.- To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities. We are at once citizens of different nations and of one world in which the local and global are linked.

