



Deepening your Conversations with Jewish Stories

There are many reasons we tell stories. We tell stories to explore and better understand our values. We tell them to imagine what we might do in situations we have never encountered, so that we may act more intentionally when we are called to. We tell stories to remember the past and to learn from it. We tell stories to understand who we are and what we have been, and so that we can choose who we will be and where we will go.

*Storytelling reveals meaning
without committing the error of defining it.
— Hannah Arendt*

This collection of Jewish stories offers us a glimpse at meaning, a chance to take our conversations out of the nitty gritty and into the realm of the imagination. These stories can evoke the core emotions that are driving us toward the giving that brings us together. And they can reveal answers within ourselves that we would not be able to access through a simple conversation.

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1 The Rusty Penny

A famous rabbi comes to a town with a very wealthy man who is scorned by his community because they consider him to be stingy. Against warnings from the town elders, the rabbi goes to solicit a gift from this man. Through demonstrations of wisdom and humility, the rabbi encourages this man to offer a very generous gift and teaches the town elders to appreciate the man and all of his gifts no matter what size they may be.

Themes: The value of every gift; the connection between graciousness and generosity

2 Stone Soup

A traveler comes upon a depressed town where the people are cold and poor. Through a community action that convinces the townspeople to share their resources, the traveler is able to show the town just how warm and wealthy they are.

Themes: We have more when we are together; poverty and wealth are material states, but they are cultural and spiritual as well

3 Window To The World

Several old men in a hospital ward are entertained by their rabbi — the only one among them whose bed has a view out the room's only window — and his stories of the goings on about town. When the rabbi dies, the men must elect another among them to take the exalted bed with a view and take on the storytelling duties as well. Though it is a difficult transition, the new occupant learns and eventually masters the secret of the rabbi's stories.

Themes: There is no meaning like the meaning we make for each other; there are many kinds of gifts we can give each other in this life

The Rusty Penny

By Tuvia Bolton

The Rusty Penny is a classic Chassidic tale about Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745 - 1812), the founder of Chabad Chassidim. The story highlights the grace, compassion and wisdom of the rabbi as he teaches the town elders as well as its wealthiest man about the gifts of generosity and appreciation.



? **Framing Question:**
What gifts have you unlocked with grace and kindness?

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi was raising money to ransom Jewish prisoners.

He went first to a city that was famous for its miser. It seems that this stingy man, despite his considerable wealth, was loath to share his blessings, no matter how worthy or urgent the cause. Rabbis and beggars alike avoided his home. Anyone who did unwittingly end up on his doorstep was offered a single rusty copper coin, which even the most desperate pauper would promptly refuse.

When Rabbi Schneur Zalman arrived in the town, the elders of the community graciously received him. But when he announced that he wanted to visit the house of the miser and wanted two rabbis to accompany him, he was met with serious resistance. The rebbe was adamant, however, and they finally acquiesced and gave him the escort he requested.

The next afternoon the three of them were standing in front of the miser's mansion. Before knocking on the door, the rebbe turned to his companions and requested that they not utter a word, no matter what they hear or see. Several moments later they were sitting in the luxurious front room, and the owner was returning from his safe with a small velvet money pouch.

"Yes," said the rich man. "A touching story indeed! Widows and orphans in captivity. Ah, the suffering of the Jewish people! When will it all end? Here, Rabbi, take my humble donation."

To the miser's surprise, the rebbe seemed pleased by the gift of the single rusty coin. He was actually smiling at him warmly as he put the coin into his pocket and said, "Thank you, Mr. Solomons. May G-d bless and protect you always." The rebbe then proceeded to write him a receipt, adding all sorts of blessings in a most beautiful script.

"Thank you again, my friend," said the rebbe as he stood and warmly shook the man's hand, looking him deeply in the eyes with admiration. "And now," he added, turning to his two companions, "we must be on our way. We have a lot of collecting to do tonight."

As the three rabbis walked to the door, the rebbe turned and bade his host yet another warm farewell. "You should have thrown it back in his face," hissed one of the rabbis after they heard the door close behind them.

"Don't turn around and don't say a word," whispered the rebbe as they walked down the path to the front gate.

Suddenly they heard the door opening behind them and the miser calling: "Rabbis, rabbis, please come back for a minute. Hello, hello, please, I must speak to you, please . . . please come back in."

In a few minutes they were again sitting in the warm, plush drawing room, but this time the rich man was pacing back and forth restlessly. He stopped for an instant and turned to the rebbe. "Exactly how much money do you need to ransom these prisoners?"

"About five thousand rubles," the rebbe replied.

"Well, here is one thousand... I have decided to give one thousand rubles; you may count it if you want," said the miser as he took a tightly bound stack of bills from his jacket pocket and laid it on the table. The other rabbis were astounded. They stared at the money and were even afraid to look up at the miser, lest he change his mind.

But the Rebbe again shook Mr. Solomon's hand, warmly thanking him, and wrote him a beautiful receipt replete with blessings and praises, exactly like the first time.

"That was a miracle!" whispered one of the rabbis to the rebbe as they left the house and were again walking toward the gate. Once more the rebbe signaled him to be still. Suddenly the door of the house again opened behind them. "Rabbis, please, I have changed my mind. Please come in once more. I want to speak with you," Mr. Solomons called out.

They entered the house for a third time as the miser turned to them and said, "I have decided to give the entire sum needed for the ransom. Here it is; please count it to see that I have not made a mistake."

"What is the meaning of this?" wondered the rebbe's astonished companions after they had left the rich man's home for the third time that evening. "How did you get that notorious miser to give 5,000 rubles?"

"That man is no miser," said Rabbi Schneur Zalman. "No Jewish soul truly is. But how could he desire to give, if he never in his life experienced the joy of giving? Everyone to whom he gave that rusty coin of his threw it back in his face."



Discussion Questions:

• Where do you see yourself in this story?

• What lesson can the "miser" teach us?

• What stereotypes and assumptions are we battling?

• How do we learn to recognize wisdom?

Themes:

- The value of every gift
- The connection between graciousness and generosity

Stone Soup

Multiple Origins
As told by Jonah Canner

Stone Soup is a universal story, with versions that can be found in the traditions of many cultures and peoples from around the globe. It is the classic tale of hardship and the poverty of selfishness being overcome by a little bit of home cooking and the community that comes together to discover the wealth they have in each other.



? **Framing Question:**
Who inspires you to be your best self? What keeps us from always being able to act as our best selves?

Once upon a time there was a traveler. She was eighteen years old. Every morning she would wake up, roll up her sleeping bag, pack up her sack and make herself a cup of tea. While she drank her tea she would look out at the beautiful world around her and think, “where am I going to go today?” Then she would pull out her map, plan her route and start walking.

The traveler loved to explore; she loved the beautiful landscapes, she loved the trees and animals she saw, but most of all she loved the wonderful people she met along the way.

In all of her travels there was one town that she dreamed to visit. It was a town, she had heard, like no other. The people were kind, loving and generous and their celebrations were said to be second to none.

On this particular morning when looking at her map, the traveler saw she was only half a day’s walk from this famous town. In all of her excitement, she quickly gathered her things and set off on her way.

Upon arrival at the town she was surprised to see that the streets were empty and the town seemed nearly abandoned.

She went up to one of the houses and knocked on the door. The door opened and a man was standing there. The traveler asked if the man could spare some food or drink, for she had been traveling many days and was hungry and tired. The man looked at her, said, “I barely have enough food for myself”, and slammed the door in her face. She went up to a second, a third, and then eventually every house in the town and experienced a version of the same.

Dejected, the traveler went into the middle of the town square, started a small campfire, took a can out of her traveling sack, filled the can with water from the town well, and set it on the fire to boil. When the water boiled, she reached into her traveling sack and pulled out three small stones and dropped them, one at a time, into the boiling water, and sat back to wait.

A group of children came up to her and asked what she was doing. She told them she was making stone soup. When the

children said that they’d never heard of stone soup, she told them that it was a very special food that is eaten all around the world. Impressed, the children asked if they could have some too. The traveler said, “of course you can, but I only have this little can.” One of the children volunteered to bring a big pot from their house. The children then began to ask what stone soup tastes like. The traveler said, “it can taste a lot of different ways, it depends on what you put in it.” The children then started to volunteer different vegetables that they had in their houses to put in the soup. One by one the children went into their houses, took vegetables, cut them up and put them in the soup.

Then one of the adults came outside to see what all of the fuss was about. The children said that they were making Stone Soup. The adult, never having heard of stone soup, became indignant and just as the adult was about to yell at everyone to go back home, somebody lifted the lid off of the soup and a wonderful scent filled the air. Instead the adult said, “well you are going to need bowls to eat the soup out of,” and went back to their house to bring out bowls for everyone. More adults came out and volunteered items from their homes to enhance the meal. People brought out tables and chairs and bread and musical instruments until eventually the entire town was out in the square singing and dancing and having a great time.

Finally, one of the children announced that the soup was ready. Everyone sat down to eat but before they did the child who was serving the soup said, “where is the traveler?” She was nowhere to be found. Just before the soup was finished, the traveler had taken her spoon and scooped her three stones out of the soup, put them back in her traveling sack, and went on her way in search of the next town.



Discussion Questions:

• Who is the hero of this story?

• Which character would you like to see in yourself?

• What are your rights and what are your responsibilities?

• How far does your circle of obligation extend?

• What questions does this story raise about the way you think about giving?

Themes:

• We have more when we are together

• Poverty and wealth are material states, but they are cultural and spiritual as well

Window To The World

As retold by Rabbi Avi Katz Orlow

In this classic Jewish story, we see a group of old men building community around their rabbi's stories of the town he can see from his window, preparing for and making Shabbat. When this Shabbat ritual is interrupted by the rabbi's death, a new member of the community must take on the responsibility of continuing it by offering a gift he never knew he was receiving.



Framing Questions:

What makes a moment special for you? Who do you create "holiness" for?

As the story goes, there was an old age home by Machaneh Yehudah, the famous outdoor *Shuk* (market) in Jerusalem. In this facility there was one specific ward for bedridden men: Mr. Davidoff, the retired editor of a local newspaper, Mr. Cohen, who used to work in Machaneh Yehudah as street sweeper, Dr. Schaffzin, who had been the doctor in a teaching hospital, Mr. Schwartz, who was a well-regarded tailor in his day, and Rabbi Weiss, an extremely old local rabbi. All of the men were old, incapacitated and had no visitors. Their loving wives had passed and their children lived far away. They were isolated and had only each other.

In their room, they had only one window and the way the beds were configured, there was only one bed that could see out of this window. In this bed was the revered Rabbi Weiss. Every day the good rabbi would regale his roommates with stories of what he saw from his bed. As much as he loved to tell them of the weather and all of the comings and goings of the outside world, they would love to listen. And as much as they enjoyed his daily updates, they all longed for Friday. Every Friday Rabbi Weiss would tell them about the children running to get marzipan, the couples buying their challah, the busy hummus seller making special Shabbat deals, the people buying different seasonal fresh fruit, husbands getting bottles of grape juice, wives getting chicken, and grandparents getting special candy for Shabbat. All of the men were so excited by the rabbi's description of Shabbat preparation that they hardly noticed the fact that he basically had nothing to say on Saturday itself, due to the *shuk* being closed for Shabbat.

Sadly, Rabbi Weiss passed away on a Saturday night. On the following Sunday the group mourned the loss of their friend and rabbi. But by nightfall they had already started to discuss who was going to get his coveted bed. A debate ensued and each person made their argument for why they should get the bed with the view of the *Shuk*. Mr. Davidoff said, "I was the editor of the local newspaper and I know how to tell stories, I should get the bed." In response, Mr. Cohen said, "I used to work in Machaneh Yehudah as street sweeper

and I know all the ins and outs of what happens on Friday, I should get the bed." As a matter of fact, Dr. Schaffzin made his claim for the bed. The doctor said, "I should have the bed because I spent my career teaching people how to see the intricacies of the human body, surely I can handle the *shuk*." And finally Mr. Schwartz said, "Others might know the *Shuk* better than me but their vision is limited. While I cannot walk or sow anymore I still can see as clear as on my Bar Mitzvah day, I should get the bed."

After each person shared why he should be the one, they decided that it would only make sense to vote and Mr. Schwartz, the local tailor, won the bed with the coveted view.

With the help of the staff, Mr. Schwartz moved into Rabbi Weiss's bed on Monday. After all of the debates the other men assumed that he would start telling stories right away, but on his first day in the new bed Mr. Schwartz was silent. Just like Monday, on Tuesday he stayed quiet, simply staring out the window. No one said anything as they assumed that, like themselves, Mr. Schwartz was still mourning the death of Rabbi Weiss. When he was still quiet on Wednesday the other men started to get grumpy, and finally on Thursday, they started yelling at Mr. Schwartz: "Do your job! Why did you want the bed so much? Let me have the bed if you will not talk!"

And then it happened. On Friday, Mr. Schwartz started to talk. And just like the rabbi before him, he reported on children running to get marzipan, the couples buying their challah, the busy hummus seller making special Shabbat deals, the people buying different seasonal fresh fruit, husbands getting bottles of grape juice, wives getting chicken, and grandparents getting special candy for Shabbat. Because his vision was so much better than Rabbi Weiss', he shared even more details. The men were thrilled with their choice of Mr. Schwartz. And Mr. Schwartz, for his part, was satisfied and confident in his fulfilling the duty he inherited from his dear rabbi. None of Mr. Schwartz's roommates, he was now sure, would ever find out that this coveted bed did not actually overlook Machaneh Yehudah, but only a brick wall.



Questions to Consider:

- What kind of joy can ritual provide us in our development of meaning and community?
- What are the rituals

we have created for ourselves in our giving circle?

- What meaning do those rituals give to us?
- What more rituals or practices do we want this circle to have?

• How does a good story create community? What stories does our community have in common?

- Mr. Schwartz was making Shabbat for his friends because he realized that was the

obligation he inherited. What is your obligation to the other people in this room? How did you earn that obligation?

- While we are all here to give of our money, what does it mean to give the gift of perspective?

Themes:

- There is no meaning like the meaning we make for each other
- There are many kinds of gifts we can give each other in this life