



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Bereshit 5772

By Sigal Samuel

October 22, 2011

If we were asked to identify the world's most powerful movers and shakers, storytellers probably wouldn't make it to the top of our lists. But stories wield tremendous power, shaping our perceptions of others for better or worse. In a fascinating TED Talk entitled "The Danger of a Single Story," Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says that "Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize."¹ She warns that if we are exposed to only a single story about another people, we risk a critical misunderstanding. "This is how to create a single story: show a people as one thing—as only one thing—over and over again, and that is what they become."

Parshat Bereshit, the beginning of the human story, demonstrates how important stories are in shaping the way people are perceived. In the well-known story of the creation of woman, in Genesis 2, we learn that Adam was created first and that Eve was fashioned out of his rib. From this narrative, many rabbinic commentators have shaped an identity for womankind that is rooted in her subservience to the primary man. Radak, the 13th-century commentator, writes: "Since the man is the essence of creation, having been created first, and the woman is subsidiary, having been fashioned from his substance, he therefore possesses greater abilities than the female in all respects, whether physical or intellectual."² Here, Radak spotlights a single story—with potentially dangerous implications. It is not difficult to anticipate the type of power imbalances, couched in gender norms, that would result from such an account—and indeed they have.

But in focusing on this single story and its implications, these sages have elided a second story—which actually comes earlier in the text. Genesis 1 contains the lesser-known account in which male and female were created simultaneously: "God created Adam in God's image, in the image of God did God create him, male and female God created them."³ The *midrash* interprets this to mean that the initial human being, Adam, was actually androgynous: "Man and woman were at the beginning one flesh and two faces; then God sawed the body into two bodies and made each of them a back."⁴ Unlike the more well-known "rib" narrative, this story suggests a profound mutuality between the sexes. Had our society given this version equal weight, worldwide treatment of women throughout history might have looked quite different.

As we engage in global justice work it is important to recognize that, both as consumers and as creators of stories about the developing world, we have a great responsibility. We must reject the single story which, by flattening a people's experience, saps that people's power. We are all familiar, for example, with the single story of Africa: a land of breathtaking sunsets, exotic wildlife, horrible famine and abject poverty. We know the stereotypes: corrupt leadership, warring tribes, debilitating disease. We have seen the images: exhausted women with bare breasts and

¹ Chimamanda Adichie, "Chimamanda Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story," *TED Talks*, July 2009. http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html. All other Adichie quotes are from this lecture.

² Radak on Bereshit 2:18.

³ Bereshit 1:27.

⁴ Bereshit Rabbah 8:1.

distended-bellied children with flies on their lashes. How do we make sure we are not buying into—and perpetuating—this single story of Africa?

One thing we can do is challenge ourselves to glean a multitude of stories from a multitude of voices instead of relying on media images and stereotypes. We can read local, alternative sources of news and information, like the websites of African grassroots organizations or the Twitter feeds of African activists, which paint a picture of current events from an African perspective. We can read contemporary literature by writers like Adichie, who provide counter-voices to the canonical stories that non-African writers have told, over the years, about Africa. And those of us who travel to Africa can also be cognizant of the kind of stories we tell our family and friends upon our return. We can be careful to relate what Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls “a balance of stories.”⁵

In her TED lecture, Adichie asks what would happen if, in addition to knowing about Africa’s tragedies, we also knew the stories “that are not about catastrophe.” What if we knew about the ambitious publishing houses now springing up in Nigeria; about the innovative heart procedures being performed in Nigerian hospitals; and about the talented Nigerian musicians who are blending influences “from Jay-Z to Fela to Bob Marley to their grandfathers”? Whereas the result of the single story is to dispossess and to malign, the result of all these stories, told together, would be to empower and to humanize.

Parshat Bereshit, like all good literature, is characterized by multiplicity and complexity. It reminds us that to be a good storyteller is to resist stock characters and to eschew hackneyed themes. It also reminds us that, by acting as responsible storytellers in a global context, we may just succeed in creating a more just and equitable world.



Sigal Samuel is a freelance writer currently based in Vancouver, Canada. Her work has appeared in numerous publications, including *The Walrus* and *The Jerusalem Post*. She is a graduate of McGill University, where she studied philosophy, and has spent time studying at Hebrew University, Midreshet Ein HaNatziv, Northwoods Kollel and Yeshivat Hadar. When she is not writing about Jewish texts, feminism, education and mental health, Sigal volunteers for the Vancouver School Board and the Vancouver Queer Film Festival. She is currently working on her first novel. Sigal can be reached at sigal.ajws@gmail.com.

⁵ Chinua Achebe, *Home and Exile* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000).

©2011 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/dvartzedek.

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to the Jewish community and to social justice. She was a creative and vigorous supporter of leadership development, public interest law, women and public policy and Jewish culture. Lisa died tragically at the age of 54. She was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.