

The Storyteller

BY RABBI DAVID WOLPE

The most famous tale spinner in the Jewish tradition was Rabbi Jacob Ben Ze'ev Kranz, the Maggid (storyteller) of Dubno born in Setil, a town in the district of Vilna, in 1741. He was asked by his friend, the great scholar the Vilna Gaon, why he always answered questions with stories.

Once, said the Maggid, there was a Prince who wanted to become a master of archery. One day he happened to be passing through a village in the midst of an archery contest. Fascinated he stopped to watch the marvelous skill of the contestants. One in particular had an uncanny knack for hitting the target. The Prince asked for his secret. "Oh, it is simple" the man answered, "First I shoot the arrow, and wherever it lands I paint the bull's eye around it." You see, the Maggid continued, I do much the same thing. If I have a good story I paint it around the biblical verse so that it fits.

Why was the Maggid so fond of parables? Once, he explained, Truth was walking naked through the streets. When people saw him so bare and unadorned, they turned away in distaste. Truth was depressed and forlorn. On a side street, he met a friend dressed in resplendent garments. The friend, said the Maggid, was the Moshol, the Parable. Truth began to complain that no one would listen to him.

The trouble, explained the Parable, is not with you, but with your appearance. If you would take the time to dress up as I do, people would listen to you. As it is, everyone turns away. From then on, said the Maggid, everywhere Truth went, he was sure to dress up, and he was welcomed with open arms. Dressed as a parable we can see even unpleasant truths.