



Walking Between the Raindrops. 18 X 24 inches, pastel and India ink on paper.

A story includes a painting, but how do you proceed?

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Every painter chooses different themes and subjects and has a different modus operandi. I have always been a story teller, long before I got officially ordained as a maggidah in New York in 2009. Already as a child I loved to paint my stories. I usually make a couple of drawings to depict a narrative. Sometimes only one is sufficient. But how does an artist select that one scene in the story? It must be catching and at the same time represent the essence, the message.

Let’s look at an example of a drawing that was commissioned by somebody who told me he wanted “this story of the raindrops, and it’s up to you how you do it.” I love it when they say that, an artist needs artistic freedom. I retold the following story of “Walking between the Raindrops” and added the illustration you see above this article.

Witches and Witnesses, or: You Can’t Be Careful Enough!

According to the Torah we must not be superstitious. If we find witches or sorcerers in our community we must get rid of them (Shemot 22:15, Devarim 18:10), because they corrupt our desire to do mitzvot, believe in HaShem, and tell the truth. Don’t trust soothsayers, hand and card readers, or performers of magic. The Jerusalem Talmud (6:6) tells us a story about Rabbi Shimon ben Shetach (first century BCE), an honest man and a role model for the community, who was the President (Nasi) of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem.

Once, people complained to Rabbi Shimon that no less than eighty witches had settled in a cave near the city of Ashkelon. The inhabitants of the city were afraid of them, and wanted them to be removed. This was easier said than done, but Rabbi Shimon had a plan. On a rainy day he went to the cave, accompanied by many students, to investigate the matter. He asked the young men to bring large earthenware jugs with tight lids, each one of them filled with a set of clothes and a tallit, a prayer shawl. Rabbi Shimon brought his own jug as well. He instructed the students what to do, and ordered them to hide out of sight of the witches but near the mouth of the cave, and wait there till he would give them a sign.

Right before entering the cave himself, the Rabbi placed his jug behind some bushes and exchanged his wet, rain-soaked clothes for the dry ones from the jar. The witches were flabbergasted to see man come in from the rain with dry

clothes. Rabbi Shimon introduced himself to them as a traveling sorcerer who had come to learn their witchcraft, and would teach them in exchange how to walk between the raindrops to stay dry. The witch-women loved the idea. After they showed off their magic, like creating food out of nothing, Rabbi Shimon promised to conjure up eighty young men and bring them into the cave for their entertainment. He gave the students hiding outside the promised sign. They quickly put on the dry sets of clothes from their jugs and donned a tallit with tzitzit, the ritual fringes that protect frum (pious) Jews from harm. Then they ran inside. In a few seconds, each of them lifted a witch from the floor, because it is well known that witches can only perform their magic when they are connected to the earth.

In the Talmudic version of the story the witches were carried outside, tried by the court, and executed. But in some folktale versions they became good and pious women who married the students.

The Talmudic story does not end here, although the witches did. The second part teaches us an even more viable lesson. When the relatives of the eighty witch-women heard what had happened, they were incensed that Rabbi Shimon had “killed” the women, and they sought revenge. But what could they accuse the highly respected and honest President of the Sanhedrin of, or how could they hurt him? The relatives concocted an evil plan. They sent several false witnesses to the court to accuse the son of Rabbi Shimon of something terrible. The Talmud does not specify the crime, but it was something so serious that the son was sentenced to death. There was an uproar in the city when the son of the honorable Nasi was led to his execution. When the false witnesses saw him being taken away like that they felt remorse. They did not intend to become the murderers of an innocent man, in addition to having sworn false oaths. They stepped forward, confessed their lies and deceit, and revealed to the court who had bribed them to do this. Rabbi Shimon, who was no doubt greatly relieved, immediately ordered the accused, the witnesses and the crowd of onlookers to return to the court hall. But to his surprise his son refused! He told his father: “If you want to bring salvation, you must consider me as a threshold towards this goal!” What did this mean? The son reminded his father that witnesses testifying in court must be believed, even if they change their story later on. But witnesses who lie in cases involving capital punishment must be executed themselves, as a punishment and warning to others. It is possible that the son didn’t want to have anything to do with the death penalty of the witnesses, even though he was an innocent victim. He realized that people would look differently at the case of the son of the famous Nasi then they would at the case of an average citizen without connections. The son wanted to avoid the slightest doubt that the witnesses had been pressured to take back their initials

statement in order to save the son of the famous President of the Sanhedrin. He wanted people to respect the Torah, to believe witnesses, and to trust the court even after a mistake had been made. He did not want “politics” or “class” to be a factor, even if that meant he must die for his principles.

Sad but true, the son was executed despite being innocent. His father learned a good lesson. From then on he ordered that all witnesses must be cross-examined even more carefully than already was the case.

There are multiple catching scenes to choose from to illustrate this story, like:

- The Nasi interacting with the witches while they are showing off their magic;
- The students running into the cave and sweeping the witches off the floor;
- The son making a statement on his way to the execution, with horrified people looking on and witnesses hanging their heads low.



The scenes that are less interesting for an artist include the students hiding behind the bushes with their jars, the wedding between the students and the witches after they have turned into pious women, or the court room. As spectacular as weddings and court scenes might be, they appear in other stories as well, and do not capture specifically the visual essence of our tale.

Another possibility, and actually the one I prefer in my own art, is to show multiple scenes of the story simultaneously, like in medieval miniatures. My drawing focusses on the main character, Rabbi Shimon. He is prominently displayed in the left half of the composition, full length, and larger than any other character except for some witch heads sticking out of the coven. He is standing half inside and half outside the cave, gesticulating wildly to impress the witches in the right half of the drawing. The rabbi and the witches are divided by two dominating colors. Inside the cave, the red glow of a warm fire and erotic energy lights up the faces of the excited witches. Outside of the

cave, the blue color of rain and water symbolizes calmness, insight, and concentrating on the Torah. The rabbi is shown in blue, with some green and white, because he is untainted by the red energy of the cave. Short Talmudic stories often lack details, like the state of mind and emotions of the protagonists, but we can imagine how agitated the witches were to welcome somebody who ventured out in the rain to their cave. Since the inhabitants of Ashkelon were afraid of them it is unlikely that they received many visitors. And here comes a stranger who stayed dry despite torrential rains, in the drawing represented by huge raindrops. The fish under the feet of the rabbi and in the cave are not mentioned in the story but added by the artist, and suggest lots and lots of water outside, and the food the witches "created from nothing" inside. Fish are agile, change colors. This "making something from nothing" is a recurring element in witchcraft stories. The objects, like food, that appear out of the blue (pun intended) are usually stolen, and magically transported from their rightful spot or owner to the witch, who can transform and transport but not create them.

In the drawing, the witches swoop down on the rabbi like a flock of hungry birds. One of them peeks through the shrubbery growing around the mouth of the cavern. Their long, loose, floating hair suggests that they have placed themselves outside of society's (sexual) morals and customs, because at that time all decent women covered or at least braided their hair in public. The lewdness of the witches is confirmed by their enthusiastic reaction when Rabbi Shimon—in his role of a sorcerer—proposes to conjure up eighty young men for them. The red and yellow colors of the cave are in stark contrast with the students at the left side of the drawing, painted in modest grey, blue, and dark green tones. The rabbi protects himself from the bad influences of the witches with his tallit, because openly showing and being meticulous with the attached tzitzis, the ritual fringes, is tantamount to observing all of the 613 mitzvot of the Torah. There are several stories in Gemara about men intending to commit a sin, but changing their mind and repenting when they look at their tzitzis. In the drawing, the feet of the rabbi are symbolically turned as if he wants to walk away from the witches. The big letter shin (a symbol of HaShem) on his clothes symbolizes that the rabbi "has set the Eternal always before



him," (Teh. 16:8). A second shin, in red, hovers over his head to express his fiery enthusiasm for G-d and His Torah. The group of students with their jars are a small but important detail in the composition, they look eager to help Rabbi Shimon, but are not tainted by the red color representing the witches.



So, what steps are involved in painting the story of the raindrops? First of all, choosing the right scenes of the story, then depicting these in symbolic colors, making the protagonists different in size to stress their importance, using their body language and attire to imply details of the story that are not explicitly mentioned in the text, but are important for a good understanding, like the tzitzit, adding small symbolic details like the fish and the letters shin, and making sure that the composition is lively and attractive. And one has to make sure that the composition is harmonious and appealing to the eye.

I invite my fellow artists to tell me how they handle stories and what is important for them.

Shoshannah Brombacher, Holland, June 2019