

THE SESAME SEED AND THE DATE PALM TREE

A Middle Eastern Tale

There was once a king who often sailed up and down the river. One day while returning to port, he saw a fisherwoman knee deep in the water, casting out her nets. She was not the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, but something about her struck him. Later the king could not get the woman out of his mind. He sent his advisor to find out whether she was single, married, or widowed.

The advisor returned saying, "The woman is married to a fisherman, and though he is poor, he is thought well of by his neighbors."

"What a shame," said the king.

The advisor said, "Don't be discouraged. You are the king, and can have whatever, or whomever, you want. If your conscience allows, there are ways to get rid of the husband." They put their heads together and devised a plan.

The next day the king sent for the husband. "Fisherman," he said, "I shall ask something of you, and if you don't succeed, I'll have your head chopped off. You must come before me tomorrow riding and walking."

"At the same time?" asked the fisherman.

"Yes, at the same time!" snapped the king.

The fisherman went home and told his wife the whole puzzling story. "It's truly a paradox," said the husband. "How can I ride and walk at the same time?"

"Don't worry," said the wife. She went off to take counsel with her sister.

"Borrow my she-goat," said the sister. "Tell your husband to go to the palace, seated on the she-goat's back, and his feet dragging on the ground."

When the king saw the man coming to court both walking and riding he knew he'd been outsmarted. "Well, fisherman," he said, "I'm going to require another task. Tomorrow you must appear before me dressed naked."

The distraught fisherman went home and told his wife that being dressed naked was a great paradox, truly impossible. "Don't worry," said the wife, and she went to take counsel from her sister.

The sister said, "Tell your husband in the morning instead of putting on clothes, he must drape a fishing net over his shoulders." This is exactly what the fisherman did.

When the king saw the fisherman dressed naked, he realized the fisherman understood paradox, and that the third and final task must be truly impossible. "Fisherman," he said, "I want you to bring to the court an infant who tells riddles and tall tales. If you fail, I'll have your head."

The fisherman went home and in great distress said to his wife, "Now I'm done for. Where on earth is there an infant who can tell riddles and tall tales?"

"I don't know," said the wife, "but I will ask my sister."

After hearing the third task, the sister said, "There is but one class of infant who can tell tall tales and riddles, and that is one who is half demon and half human. There just happens to be such an infant in a nearby town."

So the next morning the fisherman went before the king holding the seven-day-old infant in his arms. "You expect this one to tell riddles and tall tales?" bellowed the king.

The fisherman said nothing, but the infant called out, "Peace be on you, oh great king." The king was taken aback, and the infant began his tall tale. "I'm a well-to-do fellow and here's how I got my wealth. Fifty years ago I was poor and hungry. I stood beneath a date palm heavy laden with fruit. I tossed clods of dried earth trying to knock the dates down. But the dates held fast. Those dates were sticky as dates will be, and the dirt held fast to the dates, until there was nearly an acre of land up there in the tree."

There was nothing the king loved more than a tall tale, "That's very reasonable," he said. "Go on with the tale, little teller."

"So," said the infant, "I got a plow and an ox and a handful of sesame seeds. I climbed the tree, and plowed, and planted, and the rains came, and the crops grew, and made me a wealthy man. I bought lands and have prospered ever since. Only there is one thing bothering me."

"What's that?" asked the king.

"Since that first harvest there's been one sesame seed stuck in the bark of that date palm; it has held fast to it. I've been obsessed with it for 50 years. No matter how hard I poke and prod I can't get hold of it. So, great king, here is the riddle: Should I forget about it and move on?"

The king was so delighted by the infant teller of riddles and tall tales, that he cried, "Of course, clever one! You're a rich man. You'll never want for sesame seeds. Forget about it!"

The infant replied, "You seem to be a wise king, so why not follow your own advice?"

"My own advice?" puzzled the king.

“Yes,” cried the infant. “Your life is full of ease and pleasure. You have dozens of women showering you with affection. So forget about the one you cannot have. Let it go.”

This was a king who had planned that morning to behead someone. But the infant’s words went into his ears, down through his heart, and into his belly. All the way through him these words rang true. A smile came to his lips, and he said, “So be it. Go forth good fisherman and may God bless you and your wife.”

And that is the tale of the king and the fisherwoman, and the husband, and the sister, and the goat, and the net, and the half jinn infant, and the sesame seed. So let us remember my friends, when we think we cannot contend with paradox, perhaps we can. And before we go lusting after things beyond our reach, we must first take stock of the good things we already have.

Discussion Questions:

What are some of the themes reflected in this story?

[answers might include]

Negative:

- an overbearing sense of entitlement
- abuse of power
- greed and acquisitiveness
- taking ourselves too seriously
- women as the source of lust

Neutral or Positive:

- justice and fairness
- inaccessible love interest
- letting go
- humility
- gratitude
- women as the source of wisdom

At some time in our lives we all become fixated on someone or something. How does the king deal with his obsession?

- He first engages in power maneuvers.
- He eventually accepts that he should be grateful for what he has.

How do we free ourselves from obsessions and fixations?

Who is the ultimate hero of this story?

The fisherwoman’s sister: she is not intimidated by paradox (walking and riding; clothed and naked) but is wise enough to know that two contradictory things can both be true at the

same time.

How are we personally confronted by paradox?

For spouses, parents, friends, and employers it may suggest those moments when we must be both fierce and forgiving, loving and strict, demanding and kind.

The wise counselor comes to life whenever we transcend either/or thinking to embrace a greater whole.

What does the compelling central image of the tree represent in this story?

- In Middle Eastern countries that date palm is seen as a life-giving tree.
- In the story the tree is rooted and enduring, and does not respond to external pressure.
- It outlasts human possessions, holding fast to all that sticks to it.
- The tree is a symbol of steadfastness and endurance: *“Etz chayim he lamachazikim bah...”*
(It is a tree of life for those who grasp it.)