

‘Conversations with the soul through story’: impact, dialogue and engagement in Storahtelling’s Maven programme

In March to April 2008 I spent three days a week for five weeks working with Storahtelling, effectively as assistant to the company’s founder and Artistic Director, Amichai Lau-Lavie. I performed twice with the company, researched and gathered educational materials to supplement their latest play, *Becoming Israel* (2008), and worked closely with Storahtelling artists on the creation and preparation of two *Maven* performances. In this wide range of roles I was able to experience first-hand Storahtelling’s varied work, identifying a common distinctive approach, and beginning to understand its scope, aims and effects.

I have chosen to approach this essay as a piece of storytelling and translation itself, communicating and interpreting the material and analysis to a reader necessarily separated perhaps by background and terminology, and certainly by differing experiences. Nevertheless, I aim to express, through both my message and its telling, how Storahtelling’s techniques in general and the Maven in particular “invite people for a conversation with their soul through story” (Lau-Lavie, 2008b). They do so by modelling dialogue, connection, openness, imagination and relevance, encouraging audience members to lengthen their involvement beyond the limits of the performance and go from being secondary to primary participants in a conversation.

Methodology and remit

In addition to the primary material of my official work, I have used material from conversations and interviews with Lau-Lavie, in particular at the start and end of my

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placement. I have also used my own research, reading and Jewish learning, and material from Storahtelling's website and archive of scripts, commentaries, sources and documents, including Tehilah Eisenstadt's Masters paper and Pearl Beck's evaluation.

My relationship with Storahtelling is ongoing: on leaving my placement I was given permission to adapt their particular method of "interpretive translation" (Storahtelling website, *Our Story*) for 'Storahtelling-inspired' performances in England. This research, therefore, is 'still in progress,' and will continue as such as both Storahtelling and I experiment with the newly revived tradition of the *Meturgeman*, adapting it to new audiences and occasions. I would, in fact, identify this as one of Storahtelling's fundamental principles: for a tradition to be alive and meaningful to people, it needs *always* to be 'still in progress'.

This research raises a number of questions I did not have space to examine fully. Future research on Storahtelling might analyse community impact, and how successful or not the company is at engaging audience members in longer-term commitments to learning and involvement. It might also consider the wider questions of community boundaries and the effects of using Jewish, specifically Biblical, stories to speak to Jewish audiences, and look more closely at the anthropological and social significance of the ritual elements.

Storahtelling: brief background and context

Lau-Lavie founded Storahtelling in 1998, a few months after arriving as Artist in Residence for Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, a popular and relatively innovative

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synagogue in New York City. He brought a background in Jewish education and textual interpretation, and his experience between 1992 and 1996, during which he directed the summer programs at Melitz: the Jewish Zionist Centers in Jerusalem, focusing on the integration of Jewish education via the arts (Storahtelling website, *Who's Who*). Lau-Lavie enlisted several other musicians and artists on the cutting-edge of Jewish music and performance art (Eisenstadt, 2007, p. 2). From the outset, however, artistry was integrated with education. When I participated in a group audition for new performers to join the company, Lau-Lavie listed four necessary attributes of a Storahtelling artist: two of these were related to Jewish or pedagogical knowledge and skills (an ability to read and understand Hebrew and a facility with Jewish text) while one was explicitly about performance (that the performer has stage-presence and theatrical skills).¹

Storahtelling now “promotes Jewish cultural literacy through original theatrical performances and educational programs for multi-generational audiences” and “using, twenty-first century performance art techniques [...] brings personal contemporary meaning to 5,000 years of Jewish tradition”. It does so through “four program models”: synagogue-based ritual performances (‘Shultime’ i.e. Maven), theatrical productions that adapt Jewish myths and rituals for a popular audience (‘Showtime’), training programs that familiarise artists and educators in local communities with the Storahtelling technique (‘Schooltime’), and a re-imagined worship arena for the 21st century (‘RituaLab’) (Storahtelling website, *Our Story*).

¹ The fourth was fluency in English i.e. the basic ability to communicate to an English-speaking audience.

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While New York has a strong history of Jewish or Yiddish theatre, especially in the 19th century and 1920s, the main antecedent for Storahtelling's work is bibliodrama, a technique described by Peter Pitzele, its foremost American practitioner, as a "form of role-playing in which the roles played are taken from biblical universe. The roles may be those of characters who appear in the Bible, either explicitly and by name... or it may call forth figures whose presence may be inferred from an imaginative reading of the text, such as Noah's wife." (Beck 2004, p. 5) Though bibliodrama and Pitzele's work predates Storahtelling, he is sometimes employed as one of Storahtelling's 'Shultime' artists. However, Storahtelling in synagogues is both more performative (i.e. less interactive) and, taking place in the Torah service on a Saturday morning, more integrated into the existing ritual life of communities.

Give it a Rest, West London Synagogue, 17 May 2008

It is 11:30 on a Saturday morning. One hundred or so congregants are sat in West London Synagogue's resplendent main sanctuary for a special family service to mark the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel. The Shabbat – Sabbath – service is nearing its structural climax, the Torah Service, in which the Sefer Torah – the parchment scroll on which the Five Books of Moses are written – is to be laid out on the bimah – the ceremonial stage – and the weekly portion read. Unusually, the children are told to sit on the front row by the marble floor, which stretches out about 10 metres to the bimah, because today, the rabbi explains, there will be a "very special kind of Torah reading". After the scroll is paraded in a circuit around the sanctuary, as it is every week, the children take their places, not knowing quite what to expect. Their parents also have little idea.

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Rabbi Josh Levy lays down the scroll on the altar and opens it to the correct place. Then he addresses the congregation.

“I know it says in your service booklets that Joel Stanley, a storyteller and actor, will be here today to translate the Torah reading in the ancient tradition of the Meturgeman but, as often is the case in these special family services, there has been a change of plan and instead we’re going to welcome two people who are world experts in the theme of today’s Torah portion. We are going to have our very own symposium on the ‘Sociospiritual Significance of the Sabbatical and Jubilee Years in Ancient Middle Eastern Society’. So...”

It is my cue. I get up from my seat at the corner of the marble and stride across, holding aloft a banner. ‘LET THE LAND GO’ it says. The rabbi feigns shock.

“Excuse me. Who are you? What are you doing?”

“Don’t worry,” I reply, looking into the congregation-cum-audience, “I’m not going to hurt anyone or do any damage. I just want to get my message across, because it’s such an important message. We are working the land too hard and unless we stop we’re going to be in big trouble. You know, security was very lax here. It was easier than the Houses of Parliament, and that’s saying something...”

Some giggles. The whole hall waits to see what happens next. I turn to the Rabbi and nod towards the Torah scroll: “Read”.

Rabbi Levy calls up a prominent member of the community to bless the first section of reading on the congregation's behalf. This is as usual but this time there is a special dedication, for "all those of us concerned about our environment". When the blessing is finished Rabbi Levy reads in Hebrew the first verse of the section, which is about the Shmittah or Sabbatical year, in which God commands the Children of Israel to let the land rest every seventh year. When he is finished the verse I proclaim my translation from the marble as if they are the words of an environmental protester, circa 2008.

Under normal circumstances there would be no translation, no commentator or performer. The reader would start in Hebrew and continue through to the end of the section and the concluding blessing. Congregants could, if they wished, follow an English translation in their books. Here, however, Rabbi Levy stops after each verse so I can deliver my speech.

I am free in my translation but every word has been carefully selected to reflect, update and make relevant the original meaning. The translation in the booklets, taken from the Jewish Publication Society's Hebrew-English Tanakh (2000, p. 265), is quite standard: "When you enter the land that I assign you, the land shall observe a Sabbath of the LORD". But the words I shout out are newly spun: "When you come into this Earth that you find yourself in, the land needs a rest, for God's sake!"

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I translate the seventh and final verse of the section, thank the congregation and declare my work here done, my message delivered. I turn to the exit behind the altar and stride out. While the blessing on concluding the section is read I locate my second costume and quickly start to change. I can hear Rabbi Levy, sticking to the script, apologise for that “rude interruption” and promise that very shortly the first of the two experts will be along – my cue again. I am a new character, with a new angle. I hurry back into the sanctuary.

Becoming Maven

When I arrived for my placement, Lau-Lavie shared with me the hope that I would immerse myself in the Maven (Hebrew for ‘expert’), or what he referred to as “this theatrical technique of Torah translation and interpretation” (Lau-Lavie, 2008a). The West London performance described above, *Give it a Rest* (2008), was my ‘mini-Maven’ and thus the culmination of my understanding of the technique to date. Operating as a freelance artist, actor and educator, employed by West London Synagogue to deliver a ‘Storahtelling-style’ piece, I was able to put into practice the principles I had learned.

The Maven form – “the revitalization of the traditional Torah Reading Service and the revival of the ancient craft of interpretive translation” – is undoubtedly Storahtelling’s “primary focus” (Storahtelling website, *Storahtelling in the Synagogue*). Speaking of *One Night Only* (2008), a non-Maven show I performed in for the Jewish festival of Purim, Lau-Lavie reflected: “These kind of one-off shows are great, but they’re not the main thing. They’re fun, but it’s the Maven work that makes Storahtelling what it is” (Lau-Lavie, 2008a). Maven performances generally

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take place on Saturday mornings – *Shabbat*, the Jewish Sabbath – which is a weekly occurrence, while festivals like Purim come round once a year. So basing the company’s work on the Shabbat cycle makes sense in terms of education and engagement, as well as from a business point of view. Just as I was brought into West London Synagogue as a guest performer and translator, Storahtelling charge synagogues to come in and deliver their Maven performances and weekends.

A Maven performance is essentially Torah translation through theatre, based on the ancient tradition of the Meturgeman (Aramaic for ‘translator’). One might say the Maven is Storahtelling’s version of the Meturgeman, in modern vernacular. As Storahtelling write on their website, Mavens are “first mentioned in the Bible as scholars who translated Torah in their local communities”. They were “trained orators who used storytelling to convey not only the text of the Biblical heritage but also the context of its timeless and contemporary relevance” (Storahtelling website, *Booking*). The tradition of the Meturgeman disappeared from synagogue life in the Middle-Ages, partly, Lau-Lavie and Netanel Lipshitz speculate, because its use became heavily prescribed by the Jewish religious leadership of the age. “The very act of obligating its use transformed the Targum from a vibrant, relevant, Jewish agency, into a seemingly arbitrary obligation, one that serves no function and is not understood by the wider community” (Lau-Lavie and Lipshitz, 2007). The Maven tradition “has been reclaimed by Storahtelling, lifting Torah off the page and onto the stage” (Storahtelling website, *Booking*), aiming to reinstate that “vibrant, relevant, Jewish agency” and serve a clear function in the wider community.

The Maven is focused on the Torah service, a ceremony already heavy with ritual and theatricality. While the reading of the Torah is “one of the oldest forms of ritual storytelling still in practice [...] performed weekly for over two millennia in synagogues across the world” (Storahtelling, *Storahtelling in the Synagogue*), most of its symbolism and meaning is lost on congregations, especially those that define themselves as non-Orthodox. Thus the Maven is a translation on multiple levels: incorporating the ritual elements into a relevant and comprehensible form of education and entertainment for an age in which “popular culture is the chief purveyor of myth, ethos and social values” (Lau-Lavie, 2002b); translating the little-understood Hebrew of the original text into the local vernacular; and reaching across the divide of years to relate the passage to the congregants’ own lives.

Interview with Amichai Lau-Lavie, New York City, 17 April 2008

It is 8:30 on a Thursday evening and Lau-Lavie and I are sitting outside a restaurant in the East Village. I have just finished my last day at the Storahtelling offices and am using this opportunity to find out what really lies behind the company’s vision.

Lau-Lavie has just described to me what Storahtelling want a congregational audience to come out with from a performance. Was it inspiring? Was it educational? Did it reinvigorate and change your concept of ritual life? Was it moving, engaging your emotional intelligence? Is this something you feel you want to follow up, maybe sending some of your people on future training? What took you out of your comfort zone? How can you see this integrated into your synagogue culture?

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“Basically,” he explains, “the questions are all about impact, beyond a one-time ‘Yay! Love! Fun!’ What’s the next step? Is this going to have continuity? Is this going to impact change and disseminate growth. Because I’m interested in systemic therapy... Well, healing.”

So I go on: “I’m hearing the long-term goals and the vision. But I still want to ask... why? Why Storahtelling? At the very highest level, what are you trying to do?”

Lau-Lavie thinks silently for a while before replying.

“I’m not sure that it’s the highest level, but on some level, I deeply believe that the human soul strives on stories, particularly strives and grows on stories that are significant stories... I want to invite people for a conversation with their soul through story, through myth, through legend – in this Judaeo context, through the Judaic mythology known as Torah. My bottom line is not educated Jews. My bottom line is humans who are fully alive and are connected to their life journey through the stories, the vocabulary, the mythology, the narratives that define who they are. So the Torah service is one of those opportunities where storytelling can become a real personal and collective opportunity for people to be in contact with their souls through story. That’s my bottom line.” (Lau-Lavie, 2008b)

Conversations with the soul through story

What does this phrase, identified here as one of the highest aims of Storahtelling’s work, mean? Is it possible to trace and translate it back to the language of drama and education? Did audience members at my West London Maven performance conduct

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conversations with their souls through story? What is a soul and how can I have a conversation with it?

The language of 'souls' is of course native to religious discourse and therefore somewhat appropriate to Storahtelling, who mainly operate in Jewish ritual settings. Various theatre practitioners have also used such terminology. "Theatre," claims Ariane Mnouchkine, "is a place of language and of thought, an exploration of the facts and the soul of history" (Miller, 2007, p. 27) and Antonin Artaud writes that "Belief in soul's flowing substantiality is essential to the actor's craft" (Artaud, 1993, p. 90). The term poses more of a problem to academic discourse, as it means different things to different people and is almost impossible to prove or measure. For the purposes of this essay I would like to suggest a small number of ways of understanding its meaning, that are particularly suited to Storahtelling. 'Soul', in this context, is related to interiority, transcendence, ineffability, personal as opposed to institutional or received meaning, presence, and openness to the collapse of old and the possibility of new understandings.

According to Rabbi Arthur Green, the human soul is "that innermost self, the place where each of our individual selves discovers its root in the single Self of the universe" (Green, 2003, xiii). I am interested here not in the accuracy or otherwise of Green's metaphysics but in his association of soul with both individuality and universality, both deep interiority and massive transcendence. One of four Storahtelling actors interviewed by Tehilah Eisenstadt uses the metaphor of depth to describe his personal interest in the work. He is "not interested in obedience, [but] rather devotion. Do things that help crack the text so we can go deeper, [so] we don't

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have to be polite” (Eisenstadt, 2007, p. 5). Elsewhere, one of the actors (it is unclear if it is the same one) says what he gets from the Storahtelling process is “something larger [...] spiritual moments and insights” (p. 12). This is consonant both with Green’s “single Self of the universe” and with Ken Wilber’s understanding of soul as the “level of human selfhood” *transcending and including* mind and body (Wilber, 2001, p. 67). Already we can begin to conceive of soul as something that links the deeply personal with what lies beyond the boundaries of the small self. Soul then is where the interior *converses* with the transcendent and vice-versa.

How is this seen in Storahtelling’s work and especially in the Maven? It was clear throughout my placement that each performance attempts to speak to audience members at their most individual level of selfhood. From the start of working on a specific performance, Storahtelling actors are encouraged from the start to understand and cater to their audience so it is meaningful to them. As one actor put it:

Know your audience ahead of time. Someone should call a layperson and ask for a description of the community, the challenges it has had, its success. This is how we look to build community: understand them and what’s relevant for their region or world. It is an important starting point before encountering text. [This information] acts as a lens. (Eisenstadt, 2007, p. 10)

When deciding, in the rehearsal process, how to interpret a text, the actors bring their own personalities, views and experiences and combine that with what is effectively an attempt to ‘see through the eyes’ of the congregation for whom they will be performing. Thus, as perhaps in all theatre, the conversation between actors and spectators begins, at least in the imagination of the actors, before the two groups have even met. That Storahtelling emphasise this so explicitly to their actors is evidence of the ‘applied’ nature of their drama: they place their audience and their needs at the

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centre of their theatre. I worked with Lau-Lavie and Avi Fox-Rosen in formulating the text for a *Maven* to take place in Los Angeles for Temple Emanuel, an affluent Beverley Hills synagogue. We deliberately related the Pascal sacrifice and smearing of its blood on the Hebrews' doorposts to what we speculated might speak to such a community. Fox-Rosen acted as the voice of the protesting doubter, anticipating the objections of the congregants: "Oooh, what's up with that? Bad feng shui. Blood, man. Not to mention the flies... And what kind of a statement are we trying to make here?" (Lau-Lavie and Fox-Rosen, 2008) It was a principle I automatically absorbed and adapted to my West London performance.

Rabbi Levy described to me the community and we decided not to include 'the second *aliyah* stretch', an interactive section two-thirds of the way through a *Maven*, in which one of the characters asks questions of the audience-members. The congregation, of a synagogue dating back to 1840 and in which top hats are still worn by the 'service wardens', was seen as too conservative and 'not ready' to be asked to participate so actively in what was already a radical innovation to the Torah service. Similarly, the characters I chose to represent – the environmental protester, an academic and an eccentrically spiritual rabbi – were all figures I guessed would fit within their own personal frames of reference. These are not, it should be remembered, the kinds of considerations taken into account in a regular Torah reading, in which the larger tradition is often fore-grounded at the expense of the personal. Unlike a *D'var Torah* (the teaching or sermon that often follows the Torah service and explicates the text), which does attempt to attempt to speak to the congregation in their own language, the *Maven* personalises the Torah reading *itself*.

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It translates the *very words of the Torah* into the perceived language of the congregation.

Storahtelling Mavens connect this sense of the personal to bigger questions, of political, social and/or spiritual import, and thus to a sense of the transcendent. What Lau-Lavie calls “significant stories”, “myth” and “legend” (Lau-Lavie, 2008b) are the vehicle for reaching outside the self towards something bigger. Fittingly, the Storahtelling approach to performance *opens up* the realm of possible meanings that Torah’s sense of the transcendent regularly holds i.e. nationhood, God and divine destiny. A Storahtelling Maven does not simply introduce alternative themes, but rather challenges narrow interpretations of these major connecting concepts, thereby enlarging the sphere by which the individual can enlarge his or her sense of self. This fits Jack Mezirow’s conception of making meaning as a learning process: “As there are no fixed truths or totally definitive knowledge, and because circumstances change, the human condition may be best understood as a continuous effort to negotiate contested meanings” (Mezirow, Jack and Associates, 2000, p. 3). So *Give it a Rest* used the concept of a divine commandment to observe the Sabbatical and Jubilee years to address contemporary issues of environmental crisis, personal overwork and spiritual sustenance. It is not that these issues, and many others besides, are not in some way in the original text. Indeed, there is a traditional Jewish teaching that there are “seventy faces” to Torah – “Turn it around and around, for everything is in it” (*BaMidbar Rabbah* 13:15). It is just that this view or intention is not consonant with most congregants’ experiences and perceptions of Judaism and Torah discourse. Michael Rosenak refers to a number of major prerequisites which can serve as obstacles to Torah study, such as “the unusual level of technical mastery required, the

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legal character of the mode of study, and the emphasis which is often placed on subscribing to a religious view of the world which assumes the authority of the Torah and the sovereignty of God” (Beck, 2004, p. 4). The Storahelling approach can be seen as an attempt to bring people beyond these obstacles, this facilitating a conversation, between self and story, or between self and soul *through* story, that would otherwise not take place.

Thus concepts, narratives, myths and archetypes are brought into the present and given contemporary meaning. As one of Storahelling’s actors expressed to Eisenstadt, one of the company’s goals is to show that “Torah is a living document, not old” (Eisenstadt, 2007, p. 6). By connecting modern sensibilities to an ancient text, and grounding the practice in the tradition and laws of the Meturgeman, Storahelling facilitate another conversation, between the past, the present and, considering what the significance of all this might be, the future. So it is unsurprising that one of Storahelling’s most prominent slogans is “deep inside tradition, way outside the box” (Storahelling website, *Our Story*) and fans given out at the *One Night Only* Purim performance bore the words “You Are Here Now: restoring ancient stories for new generations”. In that performance, Lau-Lavie, playing Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross, addressed the audience, “So this is what we have been doing for the last 5768 or whatever years yes? Nevermind... You are all here now yes?” He deliberately drew attention to the audience’s presence in the moment, as if to answer Peter Pitzele’s challenge: “Can we take the old, dry bones of the Bible and give them breath so that they may live again?” (Beck, 2004, p. 6)

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In a recent essay entitled 'You Are Here Now' and published on Storahtelling's website, Lau-Lavie makes explicit the kind of temporal conversation he wishes to facilitate:

As a Jew in the twenty-first century, I wonder at the power of our ancestral stories in shaping contemporary road maps. Are we even aware of the invisible power of inherited stories in determining our well-being, our wars, our assumed dogmas? [...] The act of storytelling - both the story and the ritual of its telling, reflects the best in human efforts to try to make sense of existence. Can a world torn by religious wars, nurtured by a rich past, and focused on a better future learn how to use the legends of our story maps to navigate us to the promised lands of our human aspirations? It can. (Lau-Lavie, 2007)

This seems to resonate with Peter Sellars' idea, cited by Ralph Yarrow, that theatre operates within "two time frames" i.e. historical sequence and the moments of recognition of what that sequence means. Yarrow, on sacred theatre, explains: "We have to live in and through history; but if we do not understand it we simply live as its prisoners, seeing only the reflections of its shadows on the wall of our cave. The sacred of theatre is the moment or motion of levitation, the *époché* of that understanding." For Storahtelling, as for Yarrow, "'Theatre' is a way of entering, accessing, stimulating this occurrence." (Yarrow, 2007, p.18)

Such moments are reached not only through words but also through silence, movement and music. Each Maven performance usually features two actors, one of whom is often a musician, adapting contemporary music to add a further layer of commentary, translation and entertainment for the audience. Storahtelling's use of theatre is already a recognition that different people learn in different ways; their use of music extends that principle, translating from verbal to non-verbal languages, reaching across genres. The idea of the sacred, like the soul, is associated with

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ineffability, or at least ineffability in *words* (Yarrow, 2007, p. 56). The non-verbal, elements of Storahtelling Maven performances are in effect translations of the parts of the original text that cannot be translated, approximations of feel, atmosphere and the intangible. They are communication strategies acknowledging that ‘different souls speak different languages’ and an individual may need a combination of media and styles to engage fully in a conversation. Humour is a further strategy. As one Storahteller put it, “[we] want to remember that the most subversive kind of entertainment is meaningful humour – sock it to them while laughing so they don’t expect.” (Eisenstadt, 2007, p. 11)

Extending the conversation

In 2007, when Tehilah Eisenstadt was investigating the transformational potential of Storahtelling, a few of the performer-interviewees expressed a fear that the opportunity to become “critically aware of one’s own tacit assumptions and those of others” might be lost for them as Storahtellers as it looked like the Maven was developing as a solo process (Eisenstadt, 2007, p. 19). That has not been the case. As mentioned above, there are usually two Maven performers – a Meturgeman and a commentator or two Meturgemans. In effect, the decision was made to preserve and develop the conversational, dialogic nature of the Maven.

Moreover, not only do the audience witness a conversation as characters interact on and around the bimah/stage. They become part of the conversation in the second aliyah stretch, when the performers pause, pose a question and facilitate the audience’s responses in character, a technique common to many Theatre in Education projects. Although I helped to prepare the Beverly Hills script and formulate its 2nd

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aliyah stretch, I could not be present at its performance. The closest I have seen to the 2nd aliyah stretch in action was during the two non-Maven shows, *One Night Only* and the children's show *One Giant Leap* (2008). In *One Night Only*, Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross (Lau-Lavie) engaged audience members in brief discussion and gauged whether they thought Haman, the 'villain' of the Purim story, should be killed (as is the story's traditional ending) or spared. In this instance, Haman (represented by a giant teddy bear) was simply imprisoned and the story's conclusion modified for the age and audience. In *One Giant Leap*, Nachshon ben Aminadav (Jacob Goodman, through a puppet) asks primary age children if they, like him, have ever been inspired by or taken courage from anyone close to them.

One advantage of the 'stretch', and similar moments of open interactivity, is the facilitation of many voices in the same space without their necessarily directly responding to the previous statement (Eisenstadt, 2007, p. 5). It widens, and brings the audience into, a conversation that has begun at least seven rehearsals earlier, when the actors have met for the first to discuss the Hebrew text with each other and two other *chevrutot* (study partners, in this case other Storahtelling artists). Indeed, the amount of time and consideration the performers and *chevrutot* spend preparing and translating the text, compared to the time the audience have to listen to and take part in the conversation, leads some Storahtelling artists to a sense that they themselves are the principle learners and audience members 'receive what they can': "all we are able to do is give the tip of the iceberg... The work that goes into a show simply cannot be passed on in one show. Maybe a 5th or 10th of that experience can be [passed on] between the [Maven] performance and [follow-up] workshop." (Eisenstadt, 2007, p. 16)

The workshop referred to here is something that usually accompanies a Maven, as part of a *Shabbaton*, or weekend, of activities booked by the synagogue. That Storahtelling offer this as their standard package constitutes recognition that, in order for audiences to have meaningful ‘conversations with their souls through story’, the interaction needs to be extended. The full range of Storahtelling’s programmes, especially ‘Schooltime’ – “training programs that familiarize artists and educators in local communities with the Storahtelling technique” (Storahtelling website, Our Story) – can be seen as addressing that purpose and increasing the impact “beyond a one-time ‘Yay! Love! Fun!’” (Lau-Lavie, 2008b). ‘Schooltime’ programmes, training seminars (‘Storahlab’) and Maven trainings increase the number of those literate in Storahtelling’s translation/interpretation technique and therefore able to act as *primary* producers of meaning in a longer conversation. Lau-Lavie envisages a time in the next few years when Storahtelling can be *almost entirely* a provider of trainings, and synagogues and communities are producing their own Mavens on a regular basis.

When viewed in the context of Storahtelling’s overall work and mission, the Maven performances are both the *raison d’être* of the Maven process and the hook by which future storahellers (small ‘s’) are pulled in. Without its immediate entertainment, impact and attractiveness as product it would be very difficult to convince others to approach Torah in this way. Storahtelling’s experience piloting a curriculum to teach the company’s method at the Hannah Senesh school would seem to confirm this, as “teachers who [...] had missed seeing the Storahtelling show [...] found it harder to connect to what was expected of them by the program.” (Beck,

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2004, p. 18) The performance is just the ‘tip of the iceberg’ but without it the process would be less powerful and less meaningful, almost to the point of redundancy.

Conclusion

In this critical reflection I have shown how Storahtelling’s Maven performances, and the process that precedes them, facilitate ‘conversations with the soul through story’ for both actors and, to a lesser extent, audience members, for whom the performance is as much an *invitation* to conversation as it is the conversation itself. Nonetheless the performance ‘personalises’ Torah, bringing into dialogue the deeply personal with the broadly transcendent, and the past with the present and the future. Storahtelling use different languages, both verbal and non-verbal, to facilitate the conversation and accurately translate Torah so the text ‘gains in translation’ (Storahtelling website, *Calendar of Events*) and speaks to the needs of each unique audience. Ultimately, the company’s goals require audience and community members to respond to a spark, kindled via the performance but leading them to a longer engagement as committed participants in an ongoing conversation.

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