

Jewish Fairy Tales and Legends
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[1919]

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The Star-Child

When Abraham was born, his father, Terah, who was one of the chief officers of King Nimrod, gave a banquet to a large number of his friends. He entertained them most sumptuously, and the merriest of the guests was the chief of the king's magicians. He was an old man, exceedingly fond of wine, and he drank deeply. The feast lasted throughout the night, and the gray dawn of early morning appeared in the sky before Terah's friends thought of rising from the table.

Suddenly the old magician jumped to his feet.

"See," he cried, excitedly, pointing through the open door to the sky. "See yon bright star in the east. It flashes across the heavens."

The others looked, but said they could see nothing.

"Fools," shouted the old man, "ye may not see, but I do. I, the wisest of the king's magicians and astrologers, tell you it is an omen. See how the brilliant star darts across the sky! It has swallowed a smaller star, and another, even a third, yet a fourth. It is an omen, I say, a portent that bodes ill. And, moreover," he added, growing still more excited, "it is an omen connected with the birth of the little son of Terah."

"Nonsense," cried Terah.

"Talk not to me of nonsense," said the magician, sternly. "I must hasten to inform the king."

Hurriedly he left the house of Terah, followed by the other magicians, some of whom now said they also had seen a star swallow four others. They did not think it wise to contradict their chief, although he had drunk a great deal of wine and could not walk steadily.

King Nimrod was awakened from his sleep, and his magicians appeared before him.

"O King, live for ever," said the chief, by way of salute. "Grave indeed is the news that has led us to disturb thee in thy slumbers. This night a son has been born unto thy officer, Terah, and with the coming of the dawn a warning has appeared to us in the skies. I, the chief of thy magicians, did observe a brilliant star rise in the east and dart across the heavens and swallow four smaller stars."

"We observed it, too," said the other magicians.

"And what means this?" inquired the king.

"It means," said the chief magician, mysteriously, "that this star-child will destroy other children, that his descendants will conquer thine. Take warning. Purchase this child from thy officer, Terah, and slay it so that it may not grow up a danger to thee."

"Thy advice pleases me," said the cruel king.

In vain Terah protested. King Nimrod would not disregard the warning of his magicians, but he consented to give Terah three days in which to deliver up the child. Sad at heart Terah returned home, and on the second day told his wife the terrible news.

"We must not allow our little son, Abraham, to be slain," she said. "If he is to become great he must live. I have a plan. King Nimrod will not be satisfied unless a child is slain. Therefore, take thou the child of a slave to him and tell him it is Abraham. He will not know the difference. And so that the trick shall not be discovered, take our child away and hide it for a time."

Terah thought this an excellent idea, and he carried it out. The sick child of a slave, which was born only a few hours before Abraham, was taken to King Nimrod who killed it with his own hands, and Terah's little boy was secretly carried by his nurse to a cave in a forest. There Abraham was carefully nurtured and brought up.

From time to time Abraham was visited by his father and mother, and not until he was ten years old did they think it safe to bring him from the cave in the forest to their home. Even then they deemed it best to be careful. Their elder son, Haran, was a maker of idols and Abraham became his helper without Haran being told it was his brother.

Abraham, the star-child, was a strange little boy. He did not believe in the idols.

"I worship the sun by day and the moon and the stars by night," he said to Haran.

"There are times when you cannot see the sun by day, nor the moon and stars by night," said Haran, "but you can always have your idol with you."

This troubled little Abraham for a while, but one day he came running to his brother and said, "I have made a discovery. I shall no longer worship the sun, nor the moon, nor the stars. There must be some mighty power behind them that orders them to shine, the sun by day and the moon and stars by night. That great power shall be my God."

Abraham asked all sorts of queer questions of his father. "Who made the sun and the moon and the stars?" he asked.

"I know not," replied Terah.

"I have asked all your idols, your gods. and they answer not," said Abraham.

"They cannot speak," said Terah.

"Then why do you pray to them and worship them?" persisted the boy.

Terah did not answer. Abraham asked his mother, but she could only tell him that the gods who created everything were with them in the house.

"But Haran made those silly things of wood and clay," said Abraham, and at last they refused to answer his awkward questions.

Mostly he stood at the door of the house, gazing at the sky as if trying to read the secrets behind the sun and stars.

"Thou shouldst have been placed with an astrologer," said Haran to him one day. "Thou art a child of the stars."

Terah heard this and was angry with Haran, for he feared that the secret of the child's birth might be betrayed.

"I know not why my father keeps thee here," said Haran afterward to Abraham. "Thou art becoming lazy. I have worked enough this day and will go out to the woods to watch the hunting. Stay thou here. Perchance a purchaser may come. Be heedful and obtain good payment for the idols."

Not long after Haran left, an old man entered the shop and said he wished to buy an idol.

"I dropped my idol on the ground yesterday and it broke," he said. "I must have a stronger one."

"Certainly thou must have a god so strong that naught can break it," answered Abraham. "Tell me, how old art thou?"

"Full sixty years, boy," replied the man.

"And yet thou hast not reached years of wisdom," said Abraham. "See how easy it is to break thy gods," and he took a stick and smashed one of the idols with a single blow.

The old man fled from the shop horrified.

Next, a woman entered.

"I am too poor to have an idol of my own," she said. "Therefore, I have brought a little food as an offering to one of the many gods here."

"Offer it to any idol that pleases thee," said Abraham, with a laugh.

The woman placed it before the smallest idol.

"This idol is small and surly," said the boy. "It does not accept thy offering," and he raised his stick and smashed it.

"Try a bigger idol with thy offering," he said, and the woman did so.

"Thou also hast no manners," said Abraham, addressing the god; "eat, or I shall smash thee to pieces."

The idol, of course, did not eat, and so Abraham broke it, and the woman rushed out into the street in great alarm.

Abraham tried all the idols in turn with the food, and as each was unable to eat, he broke them all except the largest. Before this idol, which was as tall as a man, he paused. Then, laughing loudly, he placed the stick which he had used in the idol's hand.

By this time, a crowd, attracted by the cries of the old man and the woman, had gathered at the door.

"What hast thou done?" they demanded, angrily.

"I? Nothing," answered Abraham. "See, the largest idol holds in its hand a big stick. It seems to me that he has been angry and has killed all the others. Ask him why he did this."

The people stood bewildered until Terah and Haran returned.

"What is the meaning of this?" they asked, pointing to the broken idols.

"Oh! Such fun," replied Abraham. "There has been a fight here. A woman brought a food offering to the gods, and they quarrelled because they all wanted it. So the big fellow here got angry, and, taking up the stick which you see he still holds, he beat the others and smashed them to bits."

"Absurd!" cried Haran. "The idols cannot do these things."

"Ask the big fellow to strike me if I have told lies," returned Abraham.

"Cease your nonsense," commanded his father.

"What funny gods yours are," said Abraham, musingly, standing before the big idol. "Do you think he will hit me if I smack his face?"

Before anybody could stop him, he smacked the idol's face and then knocked off its head with the stick.

Some of the people ran off to the palace, and soon came an order from King Nimrod that the idol-breaker should be brought before him. Abraham, Haran and Terah were seized by the guards and marched off to the palace.

"Which of you broke the idols?" asked the king, angrily.

"I did, because they were rude and would not accept the offering," said Abraham. "How can they be gods if they have no sense?"

"Not altogether a foolish remark," said Nimrod, smiling. "If idols please thee not, then worship fire which has the power to consume."

"Fire itself can be quenched by water," replied Abraham.

"Then worship water," returned Nimrod. "But water is absorbed by the clouds," said the boy.

"And clouds are blown by the wind," said Nimrod.

"Man can withstand the force of the wind." said Abraham.

"So he will talk all day long, this child of the stars," exclaimed Haran.

"Child of the stars!" said the chief magician. "Now I understand. O king, this must be no other than the child of Terah against whom, at his birth, we warned your majesty. The message of the stars has come true. He has dared to destroy our gods. Soon he will destroy us."

"Is this, in truth, the child of the stars?" asked Nimrod, of Terah, but the latter did not answer.

"It is in truth, your majesty," said Haran. "I have long suspected it."

"Then why didst thou not inform me?" exclaimed the king in a rage. "I will test this star-child with the power of my god, fire. And thou, Haran, for thy neglect, must also suffer. Guards, let them be bound and cast into the furnace to which I pray daily. Terah, thou art their father. I can forgive thee; thou wilt suffer sufficiently in losing both thy sons to my god."

The fire was made so hot that the men who endeavored to cast Abraham and Haran into the flames were caught and burned to death. Twelve men in all perished before Terah's sons were thrown into the furnace. Haran was burned to ashes at once, but to the surprise of the vast crowd that stood at a safe distance, Abraham walked unharmed in the flames, the fetters which bound him having been consumed.

When King Nimrod saw this, he trembled.

"Come forth, boy," he cried to Abraham, "and I will pardon thee."

"Bid your men take me out," he answered.

All who approached the terrific fire, however, were burned to death, and at last when Nimrod said he would bow down before Abraham's God the boy came forth unharmed.

All the people bowed down before the boy who told them to rise, saying, "Worship not me, but the true God who dwells in Heaven beyond the sun and the stars and whose glory is everywhere."

King Nimrod loaded the boy with presents and bade him return home in peace.