

Bible Stories for Atheist Babysitters

by Roz Warren

What the five-year-old I baby sit for wanted to do yesterday was torture his Barbies.

“Why would you want to do that?” I asked.

“Because we're bad guys!” said Hanina.

“Can't we be good guys?”

“Not today. Today we're bad guys.”

You may wonder what a five-year old boy is doing with Barbies in the first place. They belonged to his mom. She'd hung onto them, no doubt hoping to pass them along to a daughter. But Hanina is her third son and last child, so they ended up his.

Hanina doesn't dress them up and send them out on dates with Ken. Their fashionable outfits are long gone. Hanina's naked Barbies participate in the same activities as his other toys. They explore. They fight battles. They act out Torah stories. (Hanina is an Orthodox Jew.)

We searched Hanina's room but could only find one Barbie. We carried her to the kitchen table and Hanina got out the Play Doh. He popped off Barbie's head, then stuck a glob of bright orange Doh where her head had been.

He seemed pleased with the result.

“Can we be good guys now?” I asked.

“Not yet,” he said, encasing Headless Barbie's arms and legs in strips of green and blue Play Doh.

As a feminist, I can't say I was crazy about this game. But as a creative person, I could appreciate it as a form of self expression.

I'd seen works of art similar to “Headless Barbie Immobilized In Play Doh” at MOMA.

As the daughter of a psychoanalyst, I'm all in favor of working through a little boy's perfectly normal sadistic impulses in a safe and harmless way. Much better to pop the head off Mom's hand-me-down Barbie than pop a real school mate in the nose.

Once Headless Barbie was mummified in blue and green, Hanina lost interest. “Can we read “Bible Stories for Jewish Children?” he asked. He snuggled up next to me on the living room sofa and I read to him.

I was raised by secular atheist Jews. Caring for Hanina has meant, among other things, actually getting to know what's in the Torah.

We both got a kick out of the fact that when God commands Moses to confront Pharaoh and demand that he free the Jewish People, Moses tries very hard to get out of the gig. Yet he rises to the occasion and ends up doing a pretty good job.

Reading about Samson and Delilah, I learned something I hadn't been aware of. The book, calling Samson “a champion of the Jewish People,” described several of the things he did, even as a youth, to torment the Philistines. One was setting fire to the tails of

a thousand foxes, then turning them loose in the Philistine's fields, burning all their crops.

"That's not very nice," I said.

"The Philistines were the enemy of the Jewish People," Hanina reminded me.

"I get that," I said. "But what did those poor foxes ever do to the Jews?"

What I was thinking about (although I didn't share this with Hanina) was the so-called "triad of sociopathy," three signs that a child might grow up to be a psychopath. These are: animal cruelty, fire setting and persistent bedwetting. The young Samson seems to have killed two of these birds with one stone. (In fact, he'd killed way more than two birds. The kid had killed a thousand foxes!)

This was a role model?

On the other hand, it put any qualms I might have had about Barbie abuse in perspective.

"Can we just keep reading?" Hanina asked.

We returned to the narrative. Samson grows up and falls for Delilah. She betrays him. He brings down the temple on his enemies, killing himself in the process. The full page illustration was of the bearded Samson lying with his head in Delilah's lap, as she signals to a soldier to sneak over and cut off his hair.

At Hanina's age, I was reading "The Cat In The Hat" and "Little House On The Prairie." Nobody ever sat down and read me Torah stories. This is what I'd missed. Adult content! Seduction and betrayal! You don't find a lot of that in Dr. Seuss.

When we were done reading, we moved on to a game Hanina improvised in which we pretend to be mother and father birds, caring for our babies. The living room sofa became a nest. "We've brought you some yummy worms!" we announced to our young. "Who's hungry?"

Being kind and nurturing is more in line with Hanina's essential nature than being cruel and sadistic. I was happy that, at least for now, he'd gotten that out of his system. But I remained troubled by Samson's treatment of those foxes. As I was leaving at afternoon's end, I mentioned this to Hanina's father, a Kabbalah scholar.

"Samson was a thug," he agreed cheerfully.

Not exactly the response I'd expected.

"He could have used a good therapist," I volunteered.

Of course, if Samson had had a good therapist, he might have refrained from tormenting the Philistines. Or falling for Delilah, who, clearly, was a Very Bad Choice.

And then where would the Jewish People be?

Hanina's father told me that one eminent Jewish scholar had actually published an article concluding that Samson was a thug.

"A lot of people weren't happy about that," he said.

Maybe not. But I am. And I'm even happier to know that my favorite five-year-old is being raised by an abba who is willing to call a thug a thug, even if he is a hero of the Jewish people.

As for poor headless Barbie, knowing Hanina, when I turn up next it's likely that she'll have her head back and some clothes on, ready to perform the role of Moses's mom in our "story of Passover" play.

But if she's still encased in Play Doh, I'm sending her to MOMA.

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