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SEEDS OF A STORY

Whether I'm writing or speaking, I always bear in mind a little Hassidic story I once read. I am almost convinced it is the most meaningful thing I have ever learned about the importance of tales; for me it is enough, as I haven't read any narratology books for a long time. Here is my own, abridged version of the story:

There once lived a very wise rabbi. Times were hard, and as he saw the Jewish people in a great predicament, he went to the wood, searched for a clearing, lit the fire as prescribed by the ritual, and said a certain prayer. Thus God took pity and helped them out. Centuries passed, and a new plight was looming. Another rabbi, as wise as the first one and willing to help his people, went to the wood, found the clearing, lit the ritual fire and, since he no longer knew the prayer, asked for help in his own fashion. The miracle came, although the rabbi's ceremony was incomplete. The successive rabbis forgot, each in his turn, how to light the fire, how to find the clearing, and where the wood itself was, not to mention the prayer, which had been forgotten long before. The final episode takes place in the library of a rabbi, in recent times. Sunk into his leather armchair, staring at the ceiling, the rabbi says, "God, I do not know where the wood is, nor do I know where the clearing is, I have no idea how to light the fire according to ritual, and still less so how to say the prayer, but I know the story!" And – this is how our story ends – the story was enough, because God loves a good story.

What more can you hope for? Stories endear us to God, and are here to stay after the material props of memory are scattered to the winds. From generation to generation, they hand down a mythical heritage without which the world would be an appallingly barren place. I, for one, find it miraculous that a story leads to another story. In other words, each story bears a seed that ensures its propagation, and sometimes generates other stories. Romanians believe that, when shepherds tell stories a hundred nights in a row, a sheep will bring forth a lamb with golden fleece. You should hear those stories!

