

Q & A with **RITA ROTH** Author of

# *The Power of Song*

**Q.** Why do you think that people are drawn to folktales?

**A.** I believe it is their simple, direct approach to meaningful life experience. Born of the oral tradition, they address issues that are common to all cultures, yet are wrapped in a particular world-view.

Jewish folktales are unique in that the Diaspora placed Jews within diverse cultures where their secular tales, tempered with the sounds of the cultures they inhabited, maintain a strong Jewish voice.

This could not be more evident than in Sephardic tales.

**Q.** Could you give an example of how these tales reflect Spanish culture?

**A.** In one tale with a strong Spanish feel, a rabbi in training hears that el Cid, Alfonso VI's famous general, has conquered Valencia. He takes el Cid a gift to assure that Jews, who had been living peacefully with Muslims, would not be harmed by Christian rule.

But you need to remember Sephardic Jews are Jews from Spain, but not only Spain. They were expelled during the Inquisition in 1492 and they scattered throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. As a result, their tales not only reflect a Spanish heritage, but also the various new cultures where they settled. For example, while preserving Hebrew as the language of their faith, they developed secular languages of their own—Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Greek, Haketia.

**Q.** How did the tales in *The Power of Song* come together? Where did you find them, what cultures do they represent?

**A.** The stories in this collection are based upon tales from several sources. The Israeli Folktale Archives located in Haifa, Israel, has compiled some 20,000 tales from immigrants to Israel since 1955. Other tales were found in collections—some historical and some recently published. The basis for another story grew out of a tale told by a friend. Her grandmother, who lived in Yemen when Jews were not allowed to wear bright colors, had to wear a black wedding dress, but it was sewn together in red thread.

**Q.** What role do stories play in Judaism?

**A.** Stories hold an honored place in Judaism. From the biblical allegories (*mashal*), to the legends of the Talmud, to written and oral narrations (*aggadah*), to Hassidic tales of the Bal Shem Tov, and continuing to this day, Jews have maintained a continuous flow of both oral and written narrative. Since ancient times, the Jewish people have cherished a tradition of learning, and stories have served as a major learning tool, especially before the availability of written text. In addition to the teachings of behavior, history, and religion that came from the synagogue, a secular strain of tales flowed from the home, the street, and the marketplace. In time, written text would come to dominate, but never replace the telling of tales.

These tales served to teach and reinforce religious and moral values that helped preserve continuity. After centuries of life as “the other” with no land of their own, stories have played no small part in helping Jews endure!

