

A bird in the hand

A Jewish story

Key ideas: wisdom, pride, arrogance, respect

Once upon a time, there was a rabbi who was famous for his goodness and his wisdom. He travelled through all the villages of the country, listening to the people and answering their questions. On one of these journeys he came to a village, deep in the hills. A young girl lived there who had become famous for her intelligence. The village people had never met anyone so clever and their constant praise had quite turned the girl's head. She had become very proud and arrogant. When she heard about the arrival of the rabbi in the village, she decided she would show the people that she was even cleverer than him. She would find a question that even the rabbi could not answer.

It was a warm evening and the synagogue was small, so the rabbi decided to teach the people outside in the market place. They listened to his stories eagerly and then he asked for questions. There were none until the young girl spoke. 'I have a question for you, rabbi and am certain that you will not be able to answer it.' The crowd fell silent. They had never known such a lack of respect, especially in one so young. The rabbi remained silent, for a time, all his attention given to the girl. 'Let me hear the question then he said.

The girl stood up, holding both her hands behind her back. 'I have a little bird hidden in my hands, she said. 'Is it alive or dead?' The girl had a plan. If the rabbi said that the bird was dead she would open her hands and the bird would fly away for all to see. On the other hand, if the rabbi said that the bird was alive, the girl would crush it between her fingers and then show the fragile, lifeless corpse to the people.

When he heard the question the rabbi suspected a trick. It had no links with any of the stories he had told and it seemed to him a very odd question. The girl too had chosen her moment well, in front of so many people. Did she want to make him look a fool? At the same time, he saw a risk, whatever answer he gave. Above all he had no wish to make the girl look foolish before the people.

He was silent for some time pondering. Suddenly it came to him, exactly, the right answer. He knew it because it would bring no shame to the girl either. The rabbi spoke quietly. 'The answer depends on you,' he told her. 'You are holding the life of the bird in your hands. You can open them and allow the bird to live or you can squeeze your fingers together and crush the life from it. Only you have the answer. 'Then he drew his tallith, more closely round his shoulders and turned to move away.

No-one could fault the answer or its wisdom.