

A new voice in Jewish tales

By Kristin Erikson

When Newton storyteller Cindy Rivka Marshall began to analyze Jewish folklore, she realized most of the narratives seemed to be centered around men.

But now, Marshall is making women the focal points within these age-old anecdotes on her new CD entitled "By the River: Women's Voices in Jewish Stories," a compilation of six stories found in the Torah, the Midrash and the Talmud, among other works, that are retold from the feminine point of view.

The CD, which features instrumental music performed by Susan Robbins, artistic director of a Cambridge women's world music ensemble called Libana, is scheduled to be released at a celebration Saturday night at the Third Life Studio in Somerville.

"Over the years, I've found myself being drawn to stories about women," said Marshall, 50. "I thought, 'Well, I could adopt a folktale to make it about women.' It's an ancient Jewish tradition to create a Midrash. It's like making a story that fills in the blanks. I'm free to invent and explain it however I want."

In "The Voice in Her Heart: Miriam and Serah bat Asher," the first narrative on the compilation, Marshall intertwined classical Midrashim and biblical text with her own storytelling. She envisions Moses' sister, Miriam, meeting with an immortal wise woman, Serah bat Asher, for advice by the Nile River.

"Because Serah purportedly lived through the time of slavery in Egypt, I realized that she very well could have met Miriam," Marshall said. "I imagined that Serah was a wise woman mentor for young Miriam, and the story emerged."

Marshall also puts her own personal touch on the Talmudic tale, "Joseph Who Honored the Sabbath," which she renames "The Jewel" on the CD. By adding the character Freyda, Joseph's daughter, the story becomes a child's

journey into discovering the beauty of the Sabbath.

"I love using my imagination and injecting it into the story," Marshall added.

In an effort to help listeners visualize the tales unfolding, Robbins, who has been a close friend of Marshall for many years, uses a wide range of instruments, including the psaltery, the accordion and the oud, to draw in her audience. Robbins said she found the inspiration to create the background music for the CD by using harmonies that reflect the roots of these stories.

"I think 'By the River' is a great collection of stories and I just love how [Marshall] has brought women's and girls' voices to the forefront of these stories," said Robbins, 54, of

Somerville. "Even to this day, women are not necessarily the first voice you here in stories that emanate from other cultural traditions. It's great to give girls who are growing up in the Jewish tradition new role models."

A professional storyteller since 1989, Marshall noted that she grew up in a "theatrical family" and had always loved to express herself on stage. After being employed as a filmmaker for many years, Marshall took a storytelling workshop and the experience, she said, brought together her interests in folklore and performance.

Now, Marshall is making her name in this age-old tradition and has even won storytelling awards for her previous CD, "Challah and Latkes: Stories for Shabbat and Hanukkah," which was released more than a decade ago.

"I think there is a hunger for this kind of communication," Marshall added. "Especially during this time of technology, it's important to reach out to people with this ancient oral tradition."

For more information on "By the River: Women's Voices in Jewish Stories," visit www.cindymarshall.com.



Cindy Rivka Marshall