Abegaz and the Lion

A folk tale from Ethiopia

Long ago there lived a young man named Abegaz. He was very, very lonely. Abegaz woke one morning and realized that he could delay the matter no longer. He wanted a wife. Since there were no young women of marriageable age in his village, Abegaz decided to visit a village across the mountainside. Packing up his donkey, he set off in search of a bride.

As Abegaz approached the mountain, he heard the roar of a mighty lioness. Immediately, he jumped off the donkey and ran as fast as he could. Soon, he found himself on the other side of the mountain, with his scared little donkey trailing him. Out of breath, he sat down on a rock that overlooked a peaceful green pasture where sheep were grazing. There, in the middle of the pasture, was a lovely shepherd girl. Abegaz knew instantly that this was the woman he should wed. After introducing himself to her, he asked to meet her father. Within a week, Abegaz was married to the shepherd girl, whose name was Meseletch.

When Abegaz brought his wife home, he was very pleased. No more threadbare pants, no more dirty dishes to wash. Meseletch was as useful as she was beautiful, and Abegaz grew fatter and more content each day.

One day, however, after some years, Abegaz arrived home and Meseletch started to scream. He tried to calm her, but she wouldn’t stop. “Be quiet,” he said, as he put his hand over her mouth. But Meseletch persisted throughout the night, screaming “Aaagh!” in a high pitched voice. When the sun rose the next morning, Meseletch’s screams had not quieted. Abegaz knew he had to find a cure quickly, so he hastened to the house of the healer.

“Something is wrong with my wife,” he told the healer. “She won’t stop screaming. Can you give me some medicine to quiet her?”

“I can help you,” said the healer. “But first I need a special ingredient. I don’t have any lion’s hair left. If you’d like me to make the medicine to cure your wife, you will need to climb the mountain, find the lion, and bring me back a single hair from her tail.”

Abegaz did not relish the idea of meeting the lion. But he could not bear to go home to his screaming wife. Thanking the healer, he set off for the mountain that he had climbed some years before.

From the foot of the mountain, Abegaz could hear the lion’s roars, but he walked steadily in its direction. At last he spotted the lion and, crouching down low, came within 10 yards of her. For many hours, Abegaz watched in silence as the lion chased monkeys from the trees. As he was about to leave, he took a jar of milk from his satchel and placed it in a clearing for the lion.

The next day, Abegaz climbed the mountain once more. This time Abegaz came within a few feet of the lion. Once again he hid behind a tree, watching as the lion closed her eyes and fell asleep. As he left, he took fruit and cheese from his satchel and placed it at the sleeping lion’s feet.

On the third day, Abegaz ran up the mountain, carrying a kilo of raw meat. When the lion roared, he said, “Good morning!” and held out his hands to feed her the meat. From that day, Abegaz and the lion became good friends. He brushed the lion’s tan coat, helped her chase monkeys, and lay down beside her for afternoon naps.

“May I please take a hair from your tail?” Abegaz asked one day. “My wife needs it.”

The lion graciously agreed and plucked a thick hair from her tail.

“Thank you!” Abegaz called, as he ran down the mountain.

“My pleasure,” roared the lion.

With the hair in hand, Abegaz knocked on the door of the healer.

“I have it,” he said. “I have the hair from the lion’s tail.” Abegaz told the healer of his friendship with the lion. Then he asked, “What must I do now?” The healer smiled and shook his head, saying, “Abegaz, Abegaz. You have become friends with a lioness, but you still have not made friends with your wife? Who is a better friend, a lion or a wife? Now go home and treat your wife better than that lion.”

1. Abegaz had a big problem. He had to confront a lion. How did he do this? What was his strategy?

2. Why do you think he asked the lion directly for a hair instead of trying to take it? Why did the lion give it to him?

3. Why did the healer send Abegaz to the lion? Why are active listening and effective communication so important for peacebuilding at the personal and the international level?