L’dor vador: Storytelling for the holiday cycle in a Jewish early childhood setting

By Krista Bogetich

Early Childhood General Education

Mentor:

Nina Jaffe

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Abstract

Krista Bogetich

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Storytelling is an effective and appropriate method of engaging young children in complex concepts such as values and ethics. This paper provides rationale for using storytelling in an early childhood setting, background information on Jewish holidays, and highlights the values in the stories told during those holidays. It includes synopses of stories told through original storytelling, descriptions of activities incorporated in the experiences, as well as children’s responses and photographs of children’s work.

Note: L’dor vador is a Hebrew phrase which means “from generation to generation.”
# L’DOR VADOR: STORYTELLING FOR THE HOLIDAY CYCLE IN A JEWISH EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING

by Krista Bogetich

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I. Introduction
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A. Personal history

My path to teaching young children at a Reform Jewish preschool has been a long, winding one. My first encounter with the preschool I currently teach at was as a parent. On my first tour, I was immediately drawn to the small size, the colorful artwork, and the message of inclusion and acceptance that it offered to my family, and I chose it over many others for my first child’s school experience. My husband and I come from different religious backgrounds, Jewish and Catholic, but when we started a family, we decided to raise our children in the Jewish faith, following Jewish traditions. The golden rule, caring for the earth, and giving back to others, were values we believed in, but were just beginning to understand in a Jewish context. Finding a preschool that reflected our principles was important to us, and we were thrilled to find a place that offered a warm community, an intimate setting, and a foundation in the Jewish values that we wanted to give our children.

As I became more involved in the school, as a fundraiser, an administrator, then as an assistant teacher, I found myself considering the nature and purpose of Jewish holiday celebrations in a preschool setting. I delighted in the community celebrations and rituals surrounding the most popular holidays, like Hanukkah and Passover. These were accessible events, filled with food and song, that non-Jewish parents and teachers could recognize and find meaning in. Both of these holidays have many traditions and books that engage small children in the story of the holidays. But what of the other holidays that I was less familiar with? I struggled to understand them and find value in their
celebrations. As a parent and an assistant teacher, I allowed books and crafts to provide a sufficient celebration for the holiday, while quietly pondering what the deeper meaning was for myself and my students. How could I better understand these holidays and help make meaningful connections for my students?

While considering these questions, my studies in graduate school led me to become interested in the powerful tool of storytelling in early childhood settings (Jaffé, spring 2017). I realized that I saw little storytelling in the classroom that did not include a book or visual reference. I began telling simple stories in the classroom, and encouraged children’s participation in their enactment. I noticed how some children, who struggled in social interactions, blossomed given a character and an intention. With practice and repetition, students who were more shy found their voice and became more willing to reveal their own ideas for other stories. Participatory storytelling allowed students to become, as Ishee and Goldhaber (1990) recount of Vygotsky’s theory, “free from the limitations of the immediate environment, thereby launching the child on the road to increasingly abstract thinking” (p. 70). For students as individuals, it was freeing. As a group, it helped build cooperation and social skills, showing storytelling to be a powerful tool for community building. As I examined the role of folktales and oral storytelling in relaying the culture of a community, I realized that storytelling appeared to me an ideal companion to my quest to engage my students to find meaning in the holidays. As Chinua Achebe notes in an interview with Rob Baker and Ellen Draper (1992), “If you look at these stories carefully, you will find they support and reinforce the basic tenets of the culture” (p. 22). Many Jewish holidays are the celebration of stories passed down
through generations, lending themselves to a rich tradition of narrative engagement; for other holidays, folktales can provide the vehicle to explore the themes and values of a holiday. The abundance of Jewish folklore gave me many options to pursue a meaningful connection for my students. I set out to learn more about the holidays, review the folktales, and read deeper into the stories to discover what themes could be included in our curriculum.

**B. Guiding question and core values**

The question of values and moral development is a hallmark area of study by Lawrence Kohlberg (Crain, 1985; Fowler, 1981). Building on Piaget’s theories of cognitive development and believing moral judgement to have a rational core, Kohlberg defines six stages of moral development that he uses to describe the progression of moral thought, a sequence that he believes cuts across cultures (Crain, 1985; Fowler, 1981). The egocentrism of early childhood places students in the first stage of development, not yet able to coordinate other points of view with their own. External consequences become an important indicator for judging rightness and wrongness of behavior. Although Gilligan (1973) has called into question the judgement of women’s moral development by a masculine standard, seeing “that women impose a distinctive construction on moral problems, seeing moral dilemmas in terms of conflicting responsibilities” (p. 86), we can appreciate Kohlberg’s sequence of moral development as following the growing consciousness of self, recognition of the points of view of others, and their rights and duties to the good (Fowler, 1981). While seeing this development timetable as
“universal” (p. 50), it is still critical to recognize that the progress of individual morality is experienced in a context of an individual’s socio-cultural environment.

Knowledge of values is often incorporated into the curriculum of early childhood and plays an essential part of Jewish education. Guiding values can be found in multiple sources within the Jewish tradition: within the Torah, in the midrashim or rabbinic literature, and in the stories and customs of the yearly cycle of holidays and festivals. The Association of Jewish Libraries has culled through and identified a list of values in contemporary children’s literature to support educators working to instill a positive sense of Jewish identity (see http://jewishlibraries.org). Some values that have been identified are specific to the Jewish experience: “dwelling in the Sukkah” (layshev basukkah) or “remembering the Exodus” (zecher li-tziat mitzraim). Other values are universal, as compassion (rachamim), courage (ometz lev), or forgiveness (selichot), though they “receive a special kind of emphasis in the Jewish tradition” (Jacobs, 1960, p. 156).

Inherent in the Passover seder traditions are many values: of remembering the Exodus (zecher li-tziat mitzraim), and acts of kindness (gemilut hasadim) to strangers. As indispensable to the celebration as these values are, two parts of the haggadah - the four questions and the description of the four children - reveal the obligation to consider the nature of children when teaching the story and the values within them. In this way, the tradition recognizes both the importance of children’s moral development and the significance of adapting one’s teaching to the learning styles of diverse children.

What Jewish values are developmentally appropriate for the early childhood classroom? How can we help students make meaningful connections and internalize the
core values within the Jewish holiday cycle? In my research into four holidays, I selected four values to become the focus of the storytelling: tikkun olam, or repairing the world; ometz lev, or courage; gemilut hasadim, or acts of kindness; and shalom bayit, or peace in the home. For each, I wanted stories to create a meaningful connection with the students, whether by identifying with characters, by participating in the storytelling, or by hands-on learning projects that were suggested by the story. In this way, I hope to expand my students’ experience of stories, encouraging their absorption of the inner messages of the tale.
II. Background
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A. Storytelling in early childhood

The early childhood classroom supports children’s cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development through play and exploration, building, art-making, and storytelling. Play gives students an opportunity to explore new ideas and provides the best means of learning (Wood, 2007, p. 49). Language is an essential tool to organize these experiences, build social skills, and express oneself. In Vygotsky’s theory, language is a “tool of the mind” that influences thinking and behavior (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 21). It provides a means to describe the world, tools to express ourselves and negotiate with others, and a vehicle to pass along the collective learnings of communities and civilizations. When we tell stories in the classroom, the language of the story imparts “the social history of a cultural group, the result of members’ collective efforts to create a social way of life” (Berk & Winsler, p. 21). Stories reveal the rules and roles of a community, signaling the standards of a group and the principles they value. The stories children hear and the stories they tell provide a platform on which children can examine and manage their feelings and experiences, as Paley (2004) writes, “to use fantasy to calm our anxieties and reassemble ourselves along promising paths” (p. 19).

In addressing the role of individuals in a culture, folktales have a special significance. From generation to generation, folktales have carried valuable messages about our humanity and the strivings of our ancestors. Folktales and stories provide “narrative symbols” that help support student’s “perceptions of self and others” (Jaffe, 2000, p. 162). While the worlds described in folk and fairy tales exist in another time and
place, the characters’ fears and hopes become a link to connect children of any era to the tale. For very young children, understanding “formal” concepts of history and causality is uncommon, however, Egan (1986) reminds us that “a story-concept of causality is clearly common” (p. 23) even for the very young. Egan sees young children’s understanding of story as a basis to support learning in many subjects through the vehicle of storytelling, utilizing “children’s conceptual abilities by drawing on the engaging and communicative powers of the story form” (p. 23). The dramatic quality of a story, the affective meaning found in the human emotions and intentions of the characters, helps children access and engage with knowledge and create meaning (p. 30).

Can young children understand the deeper significance and moral underpinnings of folktales? Piaget’s theory of child development considers young children to be in a preoperational stage of development, forming ideas based on their narrowly-focused perceptions (Mooney, 2013, p. 81). Kohlberg describes young children’s thinking as “preconventional,” seeing morality as something “external to themselves,” (Crain, p. 119) and looking towards external cues to determine the right thing to do (Fowler, p. 58). In this way, children’s perception of and empathy towards characters together with their understanding of story concepts provides an avenue for processing the moral structures found in folktales. Therefore, engaging children with the characters in the story, using effective storytelling patterns, and providing a clear focus on a central task of the tale is important to children’s absorption of the message. As Egan (1986) notes, “what is completed by the ending of a good story is the pattern that fixes the meaning and our feelings about the content” (p. 31). Both the story and the way in which it is told will
have an enormous effect on children’s engagement and learning. “The structures and patterns of folk tales can support young children’s language learning and investment in oral and written literature; and provide teachers a successful way to convey ideas, information, and social values” (Jaffe, 2000, in Nager & Shapiro, [Eds], p. 170). The framework of a tale - introducing characters, describing the dilemma, and finding resolution - provides a vehicle to build connections with a young audience through the drama. The task, for me, will be to use my understanding of the children, find patterns and rhythms in my story, and connect their knowledge and previous experiences to the story through engaging storytelling. For my original storytelling, I chose four different holidays, including Shabbat. The following section includes background on each holiday and a synopsis of the stories I chose to tell my students.

B. Selected holidays: Themes and traditions

1. Tu b’Shevat

Occuring on the fifteenth day of the month of Shevat, Tu b’Shevat celebrates the New Year for the Trees. Tu b’Shevat was once used to mark the beginning of a new accounting year for agricultural tithing in Jewish communities (Kariv, 2011). There is debate about what precise event is celebrated on this date, but it is commonly thought to be when the fruit of the tree begins to form (Strassfeld, 1985, p. 179). Over time, the holiday has developed from an opportunity to remember the biblical land of Israel, Eretz Yisrael, and has become a minor festival, connecting Jewish communities around the world with the contemporary state of Israel. Celebrants take part in a Tu b’Shevat seder, eating fruits and nuts commonly found in Israel and drinking cups of wine in increasingly
darker shades, from white wine to red. Other traditions celebrate by planting trees, donating towards the planting of trees in Israel, or planting an indoor garden.

In kabbalistic tradition, trees are seen as a symbol for people, and the eating of their fruit represents a way of “improving our spiritual selves” (Strassfeld, p. 180). In this way, the individual act of eating the fruit is meant to repair the individual, and is in keeping with the duty to repair the world, or *tikkun olam*. For other traditions, the revering and planting of trees is an act of repairing the world. It is a means of honoring those who have cared for the earth before us as well as caring for those who will come after. It is this social and environmental form of *tikkun olam*, one in which caring for the environment is a means of respecting our ancestors and showing our “love and respect for those who will come after” (Cooper, 2002, p. 45) that most resonates with me. This celebration is an opportunity to understand ourselves as part of a continuum that has lasted millennia. In a preschool classroom, this provides a lens for young students to both recognize the importance of trees and nature in our lives and to reflect on their own role in protecting and supporting a healthy environment.

The story of *Honi and the Carob Tree* (Fineberg & Rotenberg, 1993) is part of a legend cycle in the Talmud about Honi Ha M’Agel (trans. Honi, the circle maker) who was known as a miracle-maker. This story has been told by many generations with countless variations, but at its core it delivers the message that we are honoring the past by caring for the future.

**Synopsis:** Honi comes upon an old man planting a carob tree sapling and asks the old man why he is planting this tree, as he knows the carob tree takes many years to bear fruit and the old man will probably not be able to enjoy it. The old man tells him that just as he enjoyed the fruits of the carob trees planted by his ancestors for him, he will plant trees for his children and grandchildren to enjoy. Honi sees this as a very smart thing to
do and continues on his walk, growing sleepy. He stops to rest and, while he sleeps, a rock grows as a shelter around him, allowing him to continue sleeping while the seasons change and the years pass. He awakens to find the world strangely different. When he seeks out the old man he finds instead a young man gathering carob pods from a now fully grown tree. When he asks the man if he had planted the tree, the man responds that his grandfather planted it seventy years ago. Honi is surprised to learn that he has slept for so long, but he remembers and reflects on the words of the old man, planting trees for the enjoyment of generations to come.

The story is simple and ideal for a young audience. With just three characters, it brings to life the central message that caring for the environment is caring for our past and our future. When the old man tells Honi his reasons for planting, the message is clear and straightforward, but the storytelling continues and follows a fantastical storyline of an extraordinarily deep slumber. The magical elements, of rocks growing and Honi waking up to a changed world, will engage young children and add elements for them to visualize during the storytelling experience. It also invites further discussion about planting, the cycle of plant growth and maturation, and the development of fruit. I have chosen these elements of fantasy for my retelling: highlighting the magical growth of a rock shelter for Honi as well as Honi noticing the fully grown tree and the changed landscape he encounters when he awakens. To accompany this story, there will also be a lesson in the growth of plants and, as a group, we will plant various herb seeds in planters that we will monitor and watch grow over the weeks before Passover. One of the herbs we will grow is parsley, in the hopes that we would be able to harvest parsley to use in future celebrations. Making connections between holidays with our planting can create meaningful experiences for our classroom, heightening the anticipation and awareness of future events and demonstrating interdependence within the holiday cycle.
Purim

The coming of the month of Adar brings with it a call to joyous exuberance that is part of celebrating Purim on the fourteenth of the month. Full of merriment and noise-making, Purim is a festival that celebrates the story of the victory of Esther, Mordecai and the Jews over their enemy, the evil Haman. The word: “Purim,” identifies the menacing nature of the story, referring to the “lot” that Haman uses to decide on the date of the destruction of the Jews. The story is of questionable historical accuracy (Strassfeld, p. 188), as many scholars have disputed specific facts and the story itself has many improbable plot points (i.e. foiled assassination plots, hidden identities), but the tale is a meaningful story of overcoming great odds to protect one’s community. Telling the story, through the reading of the megillah, is integral to the celebration and celebrants are invited to participate by dressing-up and making noise to drown out the name of the enemy whenever it is spoken. The noise-making and disguises invite a levity to the occasion that, as Michael Strassfeld notes, “affirms the bright moments of victory and denies the long, bleak centuries of persecution” (p. 189). Throughout the jovial merry-making, the story features characters in treacherous situations who must take great risks to stand up for themselves, showing ometz lev, or courage.

Synopsis: As King Ahasueras’s queen, Vashti refuses his thoughtless orders to dance at a feast and is banished. Mordecai will not bow to the haughty Haman and becomes the target of his murderous wrath. To save her people from certain destruction, the new Queen Esther must convince her capricious husband to stop Haman from fulfilling his mission to destroy all the Jews. For Queen Esther, her success was both necessary for the well-being of her community and far from guaranteed; she fortified herself with three days of fasting and prepared two nights of feasts to get the best results. On the night of the feast, Esther denounces Haman and reveals her Jewish identity. As
she is beloved by the king, Haman and his family are punished with execution, and the Jews of Shushan celebrate their survival in honor of Esther and Mordecai.

The *megillah* highlights Esther’s strength, courage, and the righteousness of her cause. This theme of showing courage and defending oneself and one’s community, or *kehillah*, is a potent theme for young children and connects to the growing sense of autonomy. I wish to emphasize these aspects to help make meaningful connections in a preschool classroom.

As a story with threats of violence, *Megillat Esther* in its complete form could be disturbing for a young audience, so it is important to note that tradition emphasizes “the basic character of joyousness; at no moment is the threat to the Jews in the story taken seriously” (Strassfeld, p. 188). I used text put together from two children’s storybook versions of the tale: *The story of Esther* by E. A. Kimmel (2011), and *Queen Esther saves her people* by R. G. Gelman (1998). They are simplified and shortened to be appropriate to a preschool classroom. To set the tone, the class will prepare groggers - traditional noisemakers - and children will be encouraged to wear costumes, crowns or hats. We will practice making noise with our groggers at the appropriate times, and children will have an opportunity to participate as characters in the reading. Those who participate can call out “No!” as Vashti when the king demands that she dance or as Mordecai when he refuses to bow to the arrogant Haman. Others can be Queen Esther and request that King Ahasueras “save my life and the life of my people!” Through their participation in the story, students will be engaged and encouraged to stand up for
themselves. Ensuring a fast-paced, active story experience will help the children make greater connections with the theme and the holiday.

3. Passover

Passover is the eight-day festival that commemorates the liberation of the Jews from the bonds of slavery in Egypt. During Passover, Jewish communities and families are obligated to retell the story from the Book of Exodus during a festive meal, called a seder. The word seder is Hebrew for order and this order gives structure and purpose for the evening. Readings, prayers, and songs, collected in a book called a *haggadah*, are read in a sequence, telling the story and highlighting the symbolic elements of the meal to honor the past and teach the next generation. Within this tradition, each generation is called upon not only to remember the past, but to relive it and to reflect on the ways in which slavery and oppression are still present in the world. The commandment to retell the story “leads us not simply to remember the Exodus but to expand upon the tale, to explore its complexities and develop its meaning” (Strassfeld, p. 7). It is also what the story commands of its audience: to remember and relive your ancestors’ struggles in slavery and recognize that Jews were once strangers in the land of Egypt. The message of hope is reinforced at the end with the common refrain, “Next year in Jerusalem; next year may we all be free” (Gindi, 1998, p. 30).

Passover begins on the fifteenth day of *Nisan* and is one of the most celebrated of Jewish holidays. As it coincides with the beginning of spring, themes of renewal and new beginnings can be found within the traditions. The green vegetable, or *karpas*, on the
seder plate symbolizes spring and rebirth (Strassfeld, p. 17) as well as “the new life of the Jews after they were freed from slavery” (Cooper, p. 58). Other items on the seder table serve to represent aspects of the story of the exodus. Maror, or bitter herbs, are dipped into salt water to represent the bitterness and tears of slavery. The haroset is a sweet mixture of fruit, nuts, and honey that represents the mortar used by the Jewish slaves in Egypt and serves to lessen the bitterness of slavery. As part of the preparation for the holiday, all hametz, or leavened bread, is removed from the home and only matzah, a cracker-like bread often called the bread of the affliction, is eaten for the entirety of the eight-day holiday. The eating of this unleavened bread invites celebrants to relive the Jews’ hasty flight from Egypt, as it was the only bread they could carry on the journey, a bread not allowed to rise.

The Passover seder is most often held at home, surrounded by friends and family. Offering help and hospitality to others so that they may also celebrate Passover is an important message of this holiday (Jaffe, 1993, p. 47). Special charitable donations, ma’ot hittim, are made to help those who need assistance to purchase matzah (Strassfeld, p. 30). Celebrants are often encouraged to include those who would not have a place to go at their table. The tradition of keeping a cup of wine at the table for Elijah shows both a sense of hospitality and hope for the better future that Elijah brings. It is acts of kindness such as these, the value of gemilut hasidim, that I have chosen to highlight in my storytelling in the story of “The two brothers.”

Synopsis: The story titled “The two brothers” in The uninvited guest and other Jewish holiday tales by Nina Jaffe (1993) has variants in many cultural traditions. Through the different versions, the basic narrative is of one brother’s greed and another brother’s quest for providing for his family. In this retelling, based on a Moroccan Jewish folktale, one wealthy brother denies his poorer brother’s entreaty to help his
family buy matzah for the holiday. While the poor brother sets out on a journey to ask for help from Azazel - a mysterious figure both powerful and frightening whom his brother has dismissed him to go find - he gathers requests from others in need along the way. The three spinning sisters feed him and he listens to their laments for their fiancés; the tree who is pained by the bitterness of his fruit; the ferryman helps him across the river but weeps that he will never get off the boat. For these characters, the poor brother listens to their pain and promises to help them if he can. When he finds what he believes is Azazel, he seeks help for these others he has passed along the way, reflecting the spirit of gemilut hasidim. His success is both achieved through and heightened by the success of others. For the selfish brother, his lack of gemilut hasidim, shown by unwillingness to help his brother get matzah for Passover and his desire for more, lead him to ruin.

Part of the preschool curriculum is supporting children’s growing empathy and understanding of other people. This story can engage preschool children to consider their own acts of kindness in the context of the Passover celebration. The bitter ending for the selfish brother is a punishment and will be both satisfying and clarifying for the young moral reasoners.

4. Shabbat

“More than the Jewish People has kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jewish people.” Here Elyse Frishman quotes Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg) within the side notes of the Mishkan T’filah (2007, p. 251), the Reform Jewish prayer book. The importance of the Sabbath and its role in Jewish life cannot be overstated. The belief is that as God rested on the seventh day, man, who is made in God’s image, must also rest. This ritual serves as part of the covenant between God and the Jewish people (Abramowitz & Silverman, 1997, p. 40). On this day, beginning at sundown on Friday evening and ending once three stars are seen in the sky on Saturday night, Jews are to refrain from work and are called on to create shalom bayit, or peace in the house (Abramowitz &
Silverman, p. 63). Those that celebrate the Sabbath begin the evening with prayers for the day, and often include prayers for the bread and wine as well as prayers for the family. Many celebrate by attending services and reflecting on the Torah portion. Through these rituals, the day becomes more than a day off, providing “a taste of the messianic era - of a perfect, harmonious world” (Abramowitz & Silverman, p. 41).

It is the emphasis on peace in the home, or shalom bayit, that I feel would be most meaningful for a preschool classroom. As teachers, we strive to create classrooms of calm and peace, and must help children recognize and develop their ability to calm their own restless bodies. Through the framework of Shabbat, personal peace becomes a stepping stone to a larger, purposeful mission to create peace in the world. “The first and most important contribution a man can make to the peace of the world is to create an atmosphere of peace around himself” (Jacobs, p. 156). The story of It Could Always Be Worse (1977), a Yiddish folktale developed into a children’s picture book by Margot Zemach, is a lighthearted and humorous tale that embodies the concept of finding peace in the home.

Synopsis: A poor farmer seeks advice from his rabbi about how to address his small, noisy home, which is too full of family members. The rabbi suggests that the farmer bring first his chickens, then his goats, and finally his cow into his home. The farmer does as he is told, with progressively worse results: feathers in the food, the goat butting and braying, and the cow trampling on everyone. The farmer keeps returning to the rabbi until, finally, the rabbi suggests that the farmer send all the animals out of the house. The sudden change from the bedlam of farm animals to his family’s normal level of commotion is a welcome relief and the farmer thanks the rabbi for making his home peaceful and his life sweet.

The story is full of charming and amusing details of the chaos at home which build to a crisis and create a meaningful impact. In my telling, I will place the context of
the story around the preparations for Shabbat. The farmer would like to find shalom bayit and so goes to his rabbi to help him on the morning before the Sabbath. I will focus on the rhythm of repetition and build up - havoc, a request to the rabbi, and then more havoc - to appeal to my young class. To engage the audience further, I will ask the children to participate in making the animal noises, and count along with me as I tally the people and creatures who must stay together in the small house. By including the children in the noisy, but hopefully well-managed, chaos I hope to make the peace found at the end into a more significant experience and bring to life the feeling of shalom bayit in our classroom.
III. Storytelling sessions: Original work
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A. School environment

The setting for my storytelling is in the classrooms of a Reform Jewish preschool housed on the 4th floor of a synagogue. The neighborhood itself is filled with tree-lined streets and well-groomed sidewalk plant boxes. The area is a mixture of old, elegant row houses, large apartment buildings and new construction. It has seen a shift in its population, with an increase in young, urban professionals with children. The area has a large park, a botanic garden, a central library branch and an art museum. Nearby commercial streets have cafes and boutiques, bodegas and bars that are well-frequented, with new shops opening up often. The area is home to a few new, small private preschools and elementary schools, as well as a test prep/homework help business. Public institutions appear to be valued and supported in the community.

The temple building (built in the 1920s) has maintained its stately facade and now stands alongside a very new, luxury apartment building. The preschool can be reached by the building’s aging elevator or by the large staircase. The front door of the preschool opens to a large, open play space referred to as “The Big Room.” During the school day, children in the big room climb up and slide down climbers, ride small toy “motorcycles,” bounce on brightly colored balls, or play in the puppet theater. At dismissal, children and their caregivers and parents congregate to talk and prepare themselves for departure. The main hallway is narrow and lined with brightly papered bulletin boards that start the year empty and fill up with students’ artwork during the year. Classroom doors open off of the hallway. Each classroom is lined with individual art by the students alongside group
work pieces that celebrate themes they are working on. The Preschool has classroom programs for 2, 3 and 4 year-olds. The program for two-year-olds is half-day, while programs for three-year-olds and four-year-olds have full-day options. While it is run by the temple, the culture of the school emphasizes the universal values of education and social responsibility. There are many interfaith families, with just one Jewish parent, as well as many families of other faiths or no faith at all. Families are often encouraged to come to class to share with their classmates the different holidays or rituals that are important to them in an age-appropriate way. The school celebrates Jewish holidays in stories, songs and craft projects and hosts luncheons to mark Hanukkah and Passover. The school does not proselytize, but emphasizes the cultural aspects of the celebrations.

Families who choose this preschool value academic achievement, but also feel that a warm, play-based curriculum is the best environment to foster those goals. The families reflect the comfortably middle and upper-middle class income of the neighborhood. The school does include a sliding-scale tuition with attention to equity and diversity in the parent body.

B. Storytelling experiences for the holiday cycle.

This section includes a field-based description of the storytelling experience for each holiday including activities and children’s responses with curricular extensions. I selected different student groups for the storytelling, taking advantage of both large, mixed age groups and more intimate groups, keeping in mind the needs of each group.
1. Tu b’Shevat: Honi and the carob tree (from rabbinic literature).

Setting: On the morning of Tu b’Shevat, the preschool had held an all-school music program and fruit tasting to celebrate. The children had mimicked the growth from acorns to oak trees during one song and accused one crafty plant of drinking their milkshakes and making a mess during the playful song “The Plant Did, The Plant Did!” Each classroom held their own taste test of various fruits, with seeds and without, with pits and with skins. I decided to tell the story of Honi and the Carob Tree to my afternoon class, a small group of older 3 year-olds who stay for a lesson in Spanish later in the day.

Retelling and activity: After their rest period and a snack, I gathered the students in a circle on the rug. I redirected one student who wanted to sit in my lap to sit on her own, and told the group, “I have a story to tell today.” I asked them if they remembered what holiday we were celebrating in the morning. “Tu bishpat!” one child called out, while another said, “And it’s the last day of January! Tomorrow is February!” and another, “And then it’s Groundhog’s Day!” I nodded my head. “You are right, Today is Tu b’Shevat and tomorrow is the first day of February.” “Do you remember what we celebrate on Tu b’Shevat?” “Trees!” called out another child. I told the group that I had a story about Tu b’Shevat and trees that I wanted to share with them and started my story, “A long, long time ago there lived a man named Honi…”

As the story progressed, the children sat listening with wide eyes and found opportunities to add their ideas. In the story, Honi wonders why the old man is planting a fruit tree that will take a long time to grow fruit, and one child suggests “Yeah, like
carrots take a long time!” When Honi slept for seventy years, one child wondered, “Was he alone?” I quickly answered that yes, he was alone and continued the story. I revealed how Honi realized the wisdom of the old man and recounted what Honi says, “Planting trees is like a gift for the future, a present” and one child giggled.

“Snip snap snout, my tale is told out.” I finished the story and asked the children what things they do to help other people. “I give people smiles,” said one smiling child. “I take, I take... my mommy to the store,” another child worked hard to explain.

“Something in my cubby I made,” a third child struggled to explain the picture she had made that day. The children had many ideas to share about gifts they made or things they did to help others. “Today we will be planting, to make a present for the future.” I gathered the class around a table laid out with small pots, potting soil, seeds, and a watering can. I explained how we would take turns putting soil in the small planters, adding seeds, covering the seeds, adding a marker and watering our plants. I offered a bag of soil around the group so that each child could feel the soft, loose medium. One child pulled her hand back and said she did not want to touch it. After I told her she did not have to, she watched warily as others explored the soil until deciding to reach in the bag herself. “When I was in the Robins, I did this,” one child remembered. “We’re making flowers!” another child exclaimed while planting seeds in the soil. “When we come back, will we see flowers?” another child asked. I explained that it would take some time to grow, but that we could care for the planters and wait to see.

Once we had finished planting and watering our seeds, I invited the children to look at drawings that showed the development of seeds to shoots, stems and leaves. The
group called out the name for leaves when I pointed to the picture; they were very excited to share the knowledge they already had. “That has the same letter as the letter in my name!” “These looks like grapes.” “I see a flower growing.” “One time (another teacher) growd one of those,” one child explained to me. “It smelled gross and we throwded it in the garbage,” finished another child. They were quick to make connections to what they already understood: flowers, other seeds, and other planting experiences. We moved our planters to the window ledge and cleaned up our area. We would need to wait, like Honi sleeping, to see what would come of our planting.

Extension: As the story involves a specific tree that is not as well known in our local community, bringing in carob pods would enhance children’s understanding of the story and would promote awareness of different trees and their fruits. The carob pod could be explored and identified with appropriate vocabulary to help develop descriptive language. Students could explore the different ways carobs are used, where they might find them in the neighborhood, and could try carob items for a snack.


Setting: The children assembled in the Big Room, a large, open space with a climbing structure, a slide, a puppet theater against the far wall, and a bench with a row of steering wheels against another wall. It is the common space that each class uses for gross motor play during the school day; occasionally, it is used for all-school activities and celebrations. On the day of Purim, four classes assembled in the common room: the 2-year-olds came with noise makers, or groggers, they had made themselves; the 3-year-olds came with crowns and groggers; and the 4 year-olds came in full costume with their own handmade groggers. There were many princesses among the crowd, as well as dinosaurs, a lady bug, and even a school bus. Most of the children had been
reading or talking about Purim in their classrooms, about the story of good Mordecai and brave Esther, about the foolish king and the evil Haman, and now we were together to celebrate the holiday by reading the story of Esther from a large megillah made for the purpose.

Retelling and activity: “I will need your help to tell this story,” I began. I asked for a show of hands of any queens ready to be courageous, then I asked if there were any good guys willing to be brave to “protect your people.” Many children had raised their hands for one or the other (and some for both) of these characters. If they were courageous queens, I asked them to raise their voices with Queen Vashti to say “No! I won’t!” to King Ahasueras when she did not want to dance. If there were good guys like Mordecai, I told them to call out “No! I won’t!” when Mordecai refused to bow. I also asked them to use their groggers to drown out the name of the bad guy in our story, “Haman!” The thunderous noise that resulted as they practiced using their groggers reminded me that I needed to also have a signal to end the joyous noise, so I showed them my signal for quiet, my fingers closing together to a point. After our practice, with the help of another teacher, I unrolled part of the scroll, announced the title, “Purim, or How Esther Found Her Ometz Lev (Courage) and Saved Her People,” and began to tell the story.

The story begins with a quick act of defiance by Queen Vashti and it was encouraging to hear the participation of so many children calling out, “No! I won’t!” I could sense both the teachers and the students were actively listening for the moments of participation and I set up those moments with a prompt. I first referred to the “bad guy”
and paused to look about the room before I announced Haman’s name. The chorus of
noises was joyous and hearty, and I reminded the room with my hand gesture to wrap up
the noise before moving on with the story. When Mordecai refuses to bow to the evil
Haman, I pointed to the large lettering on my scroll, “No! I won’t!” and then asked the
“good guys” to join me in saying it. Again, the group participated fully. Even as I
continued the story, the children (and their teachers) were listening and watching for
signs of their next part. At one point, I forgot to pause for their noise when I said
“Haman,” but the group did not forget and began their stomping, gogger-shaking refrain.
I smiled as I realized my mistake, paused for the noise to reach its peak and end, and then resumed the story.

As the story unfolded, I modulated my voice to signal the emotional changes in
the story. Vashti and Mordecai’s pronouncements of “No! I won’t!” were bold and
full-throated; Mordecai’s warnings to the king’s officers and to Esther were firm and
low-pitched; Queen Esther’s pleas to save her people started from a place of fear and
gained power from the slow pace and quiet nature of her request. When the King asks
Esther, “Who is the enemy?” I paused and unrolled the scroll to reveal “Haman” in a
large font. The noise was exuberantly loud, and I let the noise linger for a moment
longer. I wrapped up the story with Haman’s banishment and the king’s pronouncement
of the celebration of Purim. We had a final cheer for Mordecai and one more for Esther
and I asked them to take their goggers and tell their own stories of courage, reminding
them that sometimes courage is loud, like when Mordecai says, “No! I won’t!” but it can
also be quiet, such as when Esther asks for help. I rolled up my scroll as teachers
gathered their classes and lead them back to their classrooms. Later that day, I said hello to a 3 year-old in the back kitchen of our preschool. She looked at me and said, “You told that princess story today, Krista!” and I said, “Yes, I did!” “With the bad guy,” she nodded at me, “I like that story.” Her eyes were wide and I was happy to see some resonance of the story linger afterwards.

*Extensions: To add to the sense of festival and celebration, the storyteller could be dressed in costume (as Queen, King, or Haman). At the end of the story, the large group could be broken down into smaller groups that write their own stories of bravery. Puppets could be made by students and then be used in acting out the stories. For quieter versions they could perform in small groups and in a smaller venue.*

3. **Passover: The two brothers** (*Judeo-Arabic folktale*).

*Setting:* It was two days before the start of Passover, and the class had spent the last two weeks engaged in learning about the holiday in many ways. They had heard the story of Moses and the Exodus, learned songs, created frogs and seder plates, and made charoset for their special Passover potluck luncheon. On this day, the class of three and four year-olds were finishing their snack and putting away their water bottles as I prepared a table with large and small bowls of flour, measuring cups of water, wooden spoons, small rolling pins, and forks. I asked the children to find a seat on the rug when they were done cleaning up, and then joined them. A few students were drawn to the bowls of flour and they were redirected to the rug. As they found spaces on the rug in a semi-circle, some children asked about what activity we would be doing. “We will be making *matzah* together today, but first I want to tell you a story about matzah and Passover.” One child asked, “Will it be real?” referring to the *matzah*, and I assured them that we would make real *matzah*. 
Retelling and activity: I began by reminding them about the Passover preparations and celebrations they had already participated in. “We have all been preparing for Passover this week and some of you have had your Passover luncheon yesterday. What kinds of special things did you have at your luncheon?” I asked. “Chocolate!” cried out one child. “My dad brought chicken,” explained another. “Did you eat challah at your luncheon?” I asked. There was one “Yes!” followed directly by another “No! We ate matzah!” I asked them if they remembered eating matzah at the luncheon. “Like the crackers?” “Matzah looks a little like crackers and is crunchy like crackers, you are right.” “I like matzah!” called out one child.

“Matzah is a very special part of our Passover celebration.” I reminded them. “It wouldn’t be Passover without it! But what if you couldn’t get matzah?” One child looked at me with a furrowed brow and squinted her eyes. “I have a story about two brothers that I am going to tell you. One brother cannot get matzah for his Passover seder and he goes on an adventure to get some. After the story, we will make our own matzah!”

As I started the story of two brothers, I pantomimed actions and dramatized the emotions of various characters to make the story active and meaningful to my students. I knocked on the floor, and acted out Yousef’s pleas for help from his older, wealthier brother. I pretended to brush aside leaves and branches from the front of the house of the three melancholy sisters who long for their fiancés. When Yousef eats the fruit of the tree, I dramatized the bitterness he tastes and the sadness the tree feels. When he meets the despondent ferryman who cries as he rows, Yousef says, “I am off to get help for
myself, for the three sisters, for the tree with bitter fruit, and I will get help for you as well, ferryman, if you wish.” Each character and encounter provided an opportunity to repeat Yousef’s mission to help himself and reveal his kindness in helping others.

Yousef completes his mission and he returns home with gifts and treasures enough for a large Passover seder meal. As I described his bountiful table and his invitation to his brother and others to share in it, I connected this generous spirit to the Passover lunch they had recently shared. “Just as you had shared your luncheon and the charoset you made with your special grown-ups, Yousef shares his seder dinner with those around him.”

The tale ended after Yacoub, following his greed, unwittingly takes the place of the ferryman on the boat. “Now,” I told my students, “we will make our own matzah, to share with our families.” We used hand sanitizer to clean our hands and moved to the large table that was set up for our project. I showed them the recipe, illustrated with pictures, and read aloud the steps we would take to make matzah. The children were drawn to the bowls of flour, and I asked them to take out some flour to put on the table in front of them. One child kept her hand in the bowl to continue feeling the soft, silky flour. One group of children helped pour water into the flour and another group would take turns stirring the mixture. Once we had mixed the flour and water into a ball, I asked the group to take up their tools (small rolling pins) to be ready for their ball of flour. Each child was handed a small ball of dough and was encouraged to flatten the dough with their rolling pin. I saw one child struggle with the stickiness and added more flour to her mixture. “Like playdough!” another child called out who was able to roll out
her dough quickly. A third child ignored her dough and instead rubbed flour up and down her arms and then on her chin. The need to move along was important both to the timing of the matzah and to managing the group. “Hold up your tools!” I announced. Most rolling pins went up in the air and I asked them, if the dough was flattened, to now use their forks to prick the dough all over. I noted those students who were able to flatten their dough and turn it over, and those who pinched off pieces from their dough or reassembled it in a ball for more playing time. I brought out baking sheets to show them the next step in our process and helped those that needed assistance to finish rolling out and pricking their matzah.

Once their matzah was taken to the kitchen to cook, we worked together to clean up our project area. “Can we eat it?” “Can I take mine home?” The students were excited to have made their matzah and excited also to show and to share with their families.

Extensions: As the story of The Two Brothers includes gifts and treasures given to Yousef, the class could make decorative Passover pieces, jeweled kiddush cups, special golden or silver decorated linens to celebrate for their luncheon. They could also make matzah before their luncheon to share with the special adults that come to the luncheon. After telling the story, the group could brainstorm ideas for helping others in the community to prepare for or celebrate the holiday.

4. Shabbat: It could be worse (Yiddish folktale).

Setting: For my Shabbat experience, I decided to tell a story adapted from It Could Always Be Worse (Zemach, 1977) to my morning class of two- and three-year-olds. As a group, they represent a wide range of abilities, particularly during group circle time. Some children are ready to engage in songs and contribute to group discussions during meetings, while others need support to become engaged in group
activities or become disruptive. My selection of this group for a story about the value of peace in the house was purposeful and I hoped to employ it for a larger discussion of peace in our classroom.

Retelling and activity: That morning, we cleaned up after our morning play period, putting away playdough, puzzles, cars, and dress-up, and I sang our song for assembling on the rug for circle time. While the class knows the song well, clean up can be a source of conflict, as some do not wish to put away toys and others find novel ways to snatch toys to put away themselves. One teacher helped three children negotiate putting away magnetic tiles, two girls sat on marks on the rug and waited patiently, and other children jockeyed for spaces next to their friends and needed guidance to calm their bodies.

We sang our welcome songs to greet each other and I told them I would be telling a story today. One child lay face down upon my lap, using his hands to poke at another student sitting nearby. Another teacher, who often supports this student during circle time to increase his engagement in our group and limit his physical expressions that can affect other students, moved him into her own lap to listen to the story. “It is a story about one family who wants to find peace in their home on Shabbat. In Hebrew it is called ‘shalom bayit’ and it is important to have a peaceful home, especially on Shabbat. What are other things we like to do on Shabbat?” I asked the group. A child called out “Eat challah!” It was Friday and celebrating Shabbat with our music teacher and a challah snack was a usual occurrence. “Yes, we eat challah every Friday. Today I will tell you the story of one poor man who wished for a peaceful Shabbat, I will need your help to tell
the story, so I want to make sure you have your listening ears on.” We sang our listening song and then I began to tell the story. The student who sat in the lap of a teacher continued to struggle to poke others near him and tried to remove himself from the teacher and from the circle. I noticed the other teacher whispering to him, and then they left the circle together. I paused and then continued with my story.

“Once upon a time,” I began, “there was a man who lived in a very small house.” Another student began vocalizing as I spoke, “Nananananana,” and I asked him to join me in counting the people that lived in the house. He stopped vocalizing and began watching me carefully. When the rabbi tells the poor man to bring his chickens and geese into his house, I inquired of my students, “What kind of sound does a chicken make?” Two children suggested different sounds (“quack” and “cheep”) and I encouraged two other children to suggest other noises that chickens and geese might make. The story continued. When the rabbi asks the man if he has any goats, one child called out “NO!” and shook his head vigorously. “Can you make a sound like a goat?” After a “Maaaa” and “Baaaa” from other students, one child responded, “No, I’m too tired.” I recounted the list of people and creatures and this same student looked weary as he calls out, “And that’s in ONE ROOM!” This three-year-old seemed particularly empathetic to the plight of our poor farmer. We reached the height of the farmer’s crisis, when the rabbi tells him to bring his cow into his home, and the story was enlivened by the rapid and hearty moo-ing that my class produced to illustrate it. The ending comes with a removal of each animal from the house and a quiet description of the family members preparing for bed. “No one clucked or cheeped or mooed in the house, no one
fought or cried or yelled. They had found peace in the house. And they had a very restful Shabbat.”

The group was quiet, and now it was time for us to transition into another room. I called out their names to line up and the lead child, whose job includes picking the vehicle/animal that we will mimic as we go to the other room, called out, “I’m gonna be cows!” They stomped out of the classroom to a chorus of moo’s and the student who had left the circle joined the group.

Extensions: The story could be retold using dolls, farm animal figures and a small structure (box, small block house), that could be offered as a choice during playtime. Children could act out the parts while a narrator tells the story. The storyteller can ask for suggestions of other animals that the rabbi says must live in the house and develop the story to fit these changes.

This was the final session of holiday tales. Most of the children had shown their engagement with the experience by contributing to the storytelling with animal sounds and responding to questions. For those who had more difficulty, we have the benefit of being able to revisit it each week on the morning before Shabbat, to expand on our experience by retelling and revisiting the ideas in it to create a stronger connection to the holiday and the value of shalom bayit.
**Educational considerations:** During the holiday storytelling experiences, I noticed what worked with my group and what did not. I could read the room to sense when students were more or less engaged, and make adjustments accordingly. I could modify my tone, to heighten or calm the tension, adjust my pacing, or encourage audience participation to recapture their attention. This process gave me information to consider for the next storytelling event or for the next year. Similarly, I could judge the activities I chose to accompany the story by observing how the work transpired and the results. But how do I gauge their understanding of the deeper context of the stories? How can I measure or observe their moral development?

I was encouraged as I noticed students making connections between the stories and their own lives and experiences. When one student connected the long growth cycle of a carob tree to what she knew about carrots, or when a student compared eating matzah to eating crackers, I could see how the stories might resonate with my groups. The planting activity and lesson on seed growth was tangible and age appropriate, employing tactile learning to make a celebration of trees for *Tu b’Shevat* more meaningful. The costuming and audience participation of the *Purim* story helped the students to see themselves in the story and empathize with the characters. Making *matzah* for Passover satisfied the children’s desires to participate in holiday preparations, make something concrete, and share with their families. During the Shabbat story, the growing crowd, with all their noises, in the small hut were a relatable group for my students. After each story, I could consider what adjustments to make to enhance the experience for another group or for the next year’s storytelling.
What I learned from large group storytelling, as I did for the Purim *megillah* story with four classes of mixed ages together, was the benefits of including intimate experiences alongside it. Just as our experience together had gained from the preparation of props, costumes and previous story recounts with books, students could benefit from small group or individual storytelling opportunities afterwards to reflect and build on our experience together. For the *Tu b’Shevat* planting lesson, having a more successful seed growth would better support student’s awareness of the growth cycle. Due to unforeseen circumstances, the seeds themselves never sprouted. I felt my students’ disappointment and hope to make better choices of seeds, or growing location, for the following year. For my young threes class, the message of *shalom bayit*, peace in the home, continues to be a challenge. I see the value in repetition; that we can tell and retell the story of the poor farmer, his family and all his livestock to engage them with the concept. I also see the need to make alterations to my lesson plan to reach the student who struggles to sit for a story in our circle time. I know that he is engaged more by song, perhaps if we sing a song, like Old McDonald, as an entry to the story? All of these experiences strengthened my understanding of the importance of observation and listening, of determining a message to organize around, of building on children’s base of knowledge, and of using hands-on activities for children to be able to explore an idea.
IV. Reflection
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This project provided training in implementing curriculum and storytelling around the holidays in my classroom, which was precisely why I had determined to explore this topic. There were unexpected realizations as well. After the Purim celebration, I was invited by other teachers to brainstorm with them for themes for their Passover art curriculum in which they collaborate with the Brooklyn Museum. They spoke of wanting to find a central theme or value for the holiday that could include work from the museum. I realized that other teachers in my school, too, were searching for a focus to help students’ engagement with the holidays.

Other issues arose that surprised me. I had been nervous about the language of some of the folktales, concerned about what these young children would gain by hearing about Haman’s hanging, for instance. I knew the drama would be important to the story, as Egan (1986) writes, “children use the most dramatic and powerful concepts to make sense of things” (p. 43), yet some language may be too graphic for young children. Would Haman be “hanged”? I was hesitant to change the words, feeling that these stories from a rich tradition should be respected. How could I justify changing the story to make it less gruesome but retain the powerful, dramatic message? Then I happened upon a post by a rabbi from my temple (Katz, 2018). He described telling the story to a group of three-year-olds where he described Haman as having “left town,” a punishment I had not seen in any of the versions I had read. I reached out to him. In our conversation about storytelling for different audiences (personal communication, 2018), I told him of my
anxiety about making changes and I wondered how to negotiate these issues of sticking to a text. “We have the midrashim,” he said, mentioning that there are many texts that you can turn to, many writings that explore the story, that would be appropriate and meaningful to different audiences, that there was not just one version to adhere to. I felt immediately released from the pressures of strict fidelity to the text, and I felt the possibilities open up. I could explore multiple versions of the stories, and once I defined the source of the conflict, I removed what was unnecessary and retained the ideas most powerful for young children. The rabbi’s words were important license for me to continue my inquiry and manage my anxiety. It also was a powerful example of adjusting your teaching to your students’ needs, so compellingly referenced in the Passover haggadah and so thoughtfully practiced by Rabbi Katz.

Finding the focus on values was a crucial part of the experience for myself and for my students. In our discussions before and after the stories, I worked to make the concepts connect to their lives: to connect the value of tikkun olam with something as simple as cleaning up their toys; to show how a school potluck can be an act of kindness, an expression of gemilut hasidim; to consider themselves as brave and full of ometz lev; to find peace in shalom bayit, even if just for a few minutes in our classroom. Whether in Hebrew or in English, I wanted to show them how they already demonstrate these values, to see themselves as the heroes and heroines of their stories. How can we know if they recognize these values and are aware of their social responsibilities? Perhaps we will know by listening to the stories they tell.
V. Bibliography
V. Bibliography


Ishee, N. & Goldhaber, J. (1990) Story re-enactment: Let the play begin! *Young Children* March 1990, (70-75).


VI. Appendices
VI. Appendices: Photos from classroom projects:

Planter for Tu b’Shevat

Megillah scroll for Purim
Matzah made by the class for Passover