

# Jewish Holidays Alive!

## Teacher-in-Role and Dramatic Activity in the Early Childhood Classroom

by Shira Epstein

As a day school drama specialist, I am continually amazed by the amount of creative energy educators are able to tap within kindergarten classrooms. Student inquisitiveness is encouraged and developed, which leads to an atmosphere of excitement that is often absent at older grade levels.

My work within the classroom serves to reinforce this curiosity about learning through the integration of creative drama and movement into Jewish thematic lessons. While my specific role in the classroom is highly specialized, the methods I use are accessible to all Early Childhood teachers; they draw upon many teachers' natural ability to become animated while facilitating classroom discussions. One of the most effective tools for dramatic activity within the Early Childhood classroom is a method called Teacher-in-Role (TIR).

### WHAT IS TEACHER-IN-ROLE?

Teacher-in-Role is a technique which engages students in a role-play, with the teacher taking on the part of a specific character who requests advice or information from students. The students may be asked to take on new roles as well, but often are addressed as themselves by the teacher in role. In the first TIR described below, the teacher takes on the role of Queen Esther addressing the Jews of Shushan for advice. In the second example, the teacher becomes a younger child asking the kindergarteners themselves for solutions to a specific problem.

TIR is an excellent method for exploring difficult choices that biblical or Jewish historical characters were forced to make, and allows them to become real people, with real fears and worries, in the eyes of young children. In addition, TIR can serve as a vehicle for students to take on the often overlooked role of experts, as they offer advice to the teacher in role as to what might be the best course of action to take in a particular situation.

Students often revel in the fact that they are able to share their perceptions of historical events and interpersonal relation-

ships with an adult who takes their ideas quite seriously. Use of Teacher-in-Role often validates feelings students have experienced at school, such as being nervous or worried, when they hear that a famous character also had and acknowledged these feelings. TIR challenges the notion that teachers are the ultimate experts, present to impart knowledge to their students, but rather allows for shared knowledge between teacher and students as to how to negotiate an often puzzling and complex world. Successful TIRs introduce a problem and present a forum for the group to offer potential solutions.

### TECHNIQUES OF TIRS

I introduce the use of TIR in kindergarten during our third or fourth session, explaining that an important part of drama is learning how to use our imagination, and that sometimes we will pretend we are things or people other than kindergarteners in a classroom. As the year progresses, students become used to the notion that sometimes I will ask them to become the animals on Noah's ark or the Maccabees in Jerusalem. Younger children welcome this sort of role play, since they are excellent at "suspending their disbelief." In other words, they are willing to accept readily that one minute I am their teacher, the next, Queen Esther, and willingly enter into situations of imagined learning. This suspension of disbelief easily lends itself to investigation of Jewish events and characters.

The following are two examples of holiday-based Teacher-in-Roles which I have implemented in several kindergarten classrooms.

### QUEEN ESTHER'S COURAGE

As I reviewed the story of Purim with a kindergarten class this past year and asked them what they thought were the most important parts of the story, I noticed that they were choosing moments of real courage on the part of the characters. They honed in on Mordechai's refusal to bow down to Haman, Vashti's refusal to dance before the king, and, repeatedly, Esther's decision to appeal to her husband to save her people. I asked the children how they thought Esther might have felt before she approached Ahasuerus, knowing that she was going to his throne without having been called. They responded that she might have been scared, nervous, afraid or worried that he might not listen to her, or might even kill her. I then told the class that in a few seconds I would put on a crown, and they would need to imagine that I was Queen Esther, who had gathered the Jews together to discuss her fears.

After thanking them for gathering together, I stated that, as they knew, Haman had created a plan to hurt the Jews, and that Mordechai had asked me to approach the king for help. The students agreed that I needed to talk to the king, so that the Jews could be saved. I then admitted my hesitation about going to the king, because I was

### Bibliography

The following are excellent resources for learning about using drama in the classroom. If not available from your regular book source, these books may be ordered from The Drama Book Shop in Manhattan (212-944-0595).

Bolton, Gavin, *New Perspectives on Classroom Drama*, Simon and Schuster, Great Britain, 1992.

Neelands, Jonathan, *Structuring Drama Work*, Cambridge University Press, Great Britain, 1993.

Neelands, Jonathan, *Learning Through Imagined Experience*, Hodder and Stoughton, Great Britain, 1992.

O'Neill, Cecily and Lambert, Alan, *Drama Structures, A Practical Handbook for Teachers*, Stanley Thornes Publishers, Ltd, Portsmouth, NH, 1982.

Warren, Kathleen, *Hooked on Drama, The Theory and Practice of Drama in Early Childhood*, Macquarie University Institute of Early Childhood, Sydney, Australia, 1992.

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scared that he might not listen to me. I told them that I needed courage, and asked them if they knew what that meant. A few hands shot up, and one child said that courage was when you squeezed your insides together and told yourself that you really, really could do something. After exploring the definition a bit further, I explained that I wanted to get courage, but wasn't sure how. I asked them if they could tell me about a time that they needed courage. What did they do to get up the energy to do something they were nervous about? One child said that courage is like when you hold your breath before going under water; you just tell yourself that you can do it, take a deep breath, and go. She related an incident from her past summer in camp when she was afraid to go under water and, by repeating to herself that she could do it, she was able to work up the courage to dive under. Another said that she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath and this gives her courage. When I asked if there are other people who can help to give us courage, another child stated that he goes to a parent, who gives him a kiss and tells him that he can "do it," which gives him courage. After a ten-minute sharing time of suggestions, I thanked them and told them that I would use their advice to help me to gather my own courage to talk to the King, and that, in fact, by sharing their suggestions, they had given me courage to talk to Ahasuerus. I then concluded the teacher-in-role by explaining that in just a minute their teacher, Ms. Epstein, would be returning. Following the TIR, we explored the end of the Purim story.

### WHAT IS TESHUVA?

During the ten days between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, I implement a series of lessons which explore how we can let others know we are sorry. During one lesson, students pick one thing they have done to friends or family members during the past year which they feel badly about, and pantomime it for the class. In a subsequent lesson, I ask the students if they are willing to imagine that I am a girl about their age, and after they have given my fictitious five-year-old character a name, we enter into a TIR in which I introduce a scenario. I tell them that I was playing catch with my friend out on the playground at recess (as they often do) when I suddenly decided that I didn't want to play anymore. In response, my friend got mad at me, and all I know is that I took the ball, threw it at her, and now we are in a fight and not talking.



Photo courtesy of Shira Epstein

*Shira Epstein does a Teacher-in-Role exercise with her class at the Solomon Schechter of Westchester County.*

I sit in silence until the kids ask me questions such as, "Was it her ball?" and "Why don't you want to play with her anymore?" I often respond that I don't know why I did what I did; all I know is that we're not speaking now and I'm upset. I might elaborate the scenario a bit, but eventually I emphasize that I'm sad that my friend and I are not on speaking terms, and I want to show her that I'm sorry but don't know how. I ask the students if they have ever done anything to hurt someone's feelings before, and they readily share experiences. I then suggest that I was hoping they could give me some ideas for how I might show my friend that I am sorry. They often offer suggestions such as making my friend a card, trying to talk to her, asking her if she'll play a game with me, baking her a cake or buying her a present. I let them know that I appreciated all of their suggestions, and will definitely use some of their ways to let my friend know I am sorry. During a follow-up, I ask the children to recall what they were feeling sorry about, to think about whose feelings they might have hurt during the year, and to act out for the class what they might do to show this person that they are now sorry.

### TECHNIQUES

It should be noted that TIR is a method that all teachers can utilize, regardless of their perception of their creative or acting abilities (oddly, the teachers who make disclaimers that they aren't creative at all are some of the most innovative educators I have ever encountered). It is not necessary to have any formal theater training; I rarely

use a voice other than my own when I take on roles, and often remain seated for the entire role play.

Additionally, I use only one or two simple costuming items to differentiate my teacher-self from my character, such as a baseball cap, scarf, or jacket. Often it is sufficient for me to tell the students I will be turning around for a few seconds and when I sit back down and have put on a pair of glasses, they know that I am pretending to be a different person.

Successful teacher-in-roles certainly require careful planning and structure, as the teacher must be prepared to mediate a group discussion. Some of my TIRs have been more successful in capturing the attention of my students than others, and often I find myself readjusting my line of questioning midway, based on unanticipated issues that students raise and unexpected suggestions they offer. After all, who could have foreseen that when Judah Maccabee asked the Jews what course of action should be taken in light of the terrible persecution in Jerusalem, the students would suggest that we should abandon the *Beit Hamikdash* and build a new temple on the ocean?

For teachers who are interested in integrating dramatic play into their classrooms, TIR is a starting point which immediately provides opportunities for all students to be placed within the immediate action, and invites all students to become involved. ■  
*After receiving a B.A. from Brown University and an M.A. in Educational Theater from NYU, Shira Epstein returned to her alma mater, Solomon Schechter Day School of Westchester, as the drama specialist, a position she has held for three years.*