

SCHOOL LIBRARIES

The Librarian's Role in Integrating Fiction into the Hebrew School Curriculum

Marcia Posner

New Hyde Park, N.Y.

Jewish educators bemoan the loss of students from afternoon Hebrew schools after Bar/Bat Mitzvah. It is also true that many of these "drop-outs" grow into disaffected Jews, lacking the necessary attitude and knowledge to remain active participants in synagogue services and in the Jewish community.

Usually the blame is put on the home. After all, what can you do in the school to inculcate enthusiasm for Judaism when the child goes home to a house without a mezuza^h on the door? In truth, however, even observant Jewish homes are faced with children reluctant to continue their Jewish education and who carry their adolescent rebellion into the religious sphere. Yet, if these same children from irreligious homes, or in the throes of *sturm and drang*, attend a Jewish summer camp, get involved in action-oriented youth projects, or a carefully guided trip to Israel, their disaffection is frequently reversed into enthusiasm for Judaism.

In other words, it is not enough to be resigned to children remaining fixed in Judaism at a thirteen year-old level. There are techniques to stimulate the type of learning which occurs in the situations noted above, which can be used in the Hebrew School to mold the child's attitude before Bar/Bat Mitzvah towards continuing his/her Jewish education. One of these techniques is the use of fiction to encourage *affective* learning in the Hebrew School. The librarian is the specialist who is best suited and prepared to integrate fiction into the curriculum.

The key to why informally structured, action-oriented Jewish situations have more of an impact on Jewish youth than the classroom is found in the work of Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 1960). He writes about different types of learning: the intellectual acquisition of facts and skills which take place in the classroom (cognitive learning), and the informal integration of attitudes and loyalties which occurs on an emotional

level, usually in non-structured situations (affective learning). The challenge to the Hebrew School, the Day School and other forms of Jewish education is to *incorporate affective learning into the curriculum, coordinated with cognitive learning*. One way to do this is to simulate action-oriented projects, experiences laden with positive Jewish feelings, and even pilgrimages to Israel through literature — specifically, through fiction with Jewish characters, and having positive Jewish values.

Using Fiction for Affective-Experience Simulation

Good fiction can involve the reader in emotion-laden situations which result in affective learning. It can offer new understanding about Jewish tradition and heritage to Jewish children through vicarious experiences. Writing about the need for Jewish children to understand the Holocaust, in an article about Holocaust literature published in America for children, Eric Kimmel states:

Children need to feel; in order to understand, they must be able to reach out to another human being across the barriers of time and death and fire. . . (Kimmel, 1977, p. 90)

Fiction helps the reader to feel. It does so through the employment of five literary elements: characterization, plot, theme, setting and style, of which characterization is most important. A character must have traits identifiable to the child and to which the child can relate for reader-identification to take place; and it is through identification with literary characters that the reader is afforded a vicarious experience. It is necessary that the character act authentically within the framework constructed by the author (Cullinan, 1971). He may have human weaknesses, but these are balanced by strengths rooted in Judaic teachings and/or the historic Jewish experience. He is then able to persevere, overcome difficulties, maintain integrity in the face of awe-

some obstacles, simply realize a sense of self-identity (as a Jew), or move to a higher moral or religious plane — depending on the story. Full reader-character identification allows the reader to *enter* the story.

Literary Criteria

Additional literary elements which help the reader experience the story are: plot, theme, setting, and style. A brief review of these to refresh your memory will make selecting literature for affective learning easier. The *plot* should be organic and uncontrived, not a series of coincidences. The *theme* (or author's point of view), should not be overly didactic but derived, instead, through dialogue and behavior of the literary characters reacting to events in the story's plot. The *setting* creates the reality which moves the reader from chair to time and place. One should be able to feel the "fog on the cheek," the pull of oars straining across one's back. The sound of axes crashing through a wooden door should assail the ear and make the heart beat faster.

Style (the way the author uses words and syntax), should — at least — provide a competent telling of the story with smooth transitions and coherent organization. At best — literary style can afford the reader a unique encounter tempered and shaped by what the reader himself brings to the story. When words are chosen and assembled in such a way that their meaning is not limited to what is printed on the page, but suggests something more — then the reader may find himself not only thinking: "That is what I have always felt and never knew how to express," but even: "How true! I've never thought of that before. . ."

Affective learning takes place in the reading of fiction because the learner is not passive. He or she is actively involved in the story. Sometimes literature can be more of a learning experience than life, as it is more narrowly constructed than real life. Where life is unwieldy and random, the author, like

an artist, selects his elements carefully for effect, dropping just enough clues or details to steer the reader towards an understanding of the author's point of view. Just as fiction can be used to foster positive Jewish identification, so too can it be used to promote negative feelings. That is why fiction which is used as a teaching tool for affective learning must be evaluated carefully for appropriate content.

Integrating Fiction into the Curriculum

Two steps are involved in using fiction in the curriculum. The librarian must identify the Jewish content in fiction, and the teacher must identify the Jewish principles in classroom lessons, before a coordinated curriculum can be planned.

Identifying fiction about large themes such as Holidays, Israel, or Holocaust is not difficult. Much Jewish content in fiction, however, is not that obvious. It may be subtle — implied by the actions and attitudes of characters; by relevance of time and place to the Jewish historical experience; or by additional themes subservient to the book's primary one. It is in the ferreting out of less apparent Jewish content that the librarian will have difficulty, since few librarians have time for slow, reflective reading of fiction which is essential for evaluation of philosophic and religious content, e.g., phrases that express *rakhmones* (mercy), of finally overcoming the *yetser hara* (evil inclination), or the meaning to Jewish survival of the passing on of a grandmother's name to her granddaughter, etc. In Yuri Suhl's *Uncle Misha's Partisans* a single phrase captures the essence of the sanctity of the Sabbath. The army had used the forests of the Ukraine as a hideout, as a base for military operations; then suddenly — the forest was transformed into a synagogue on Shabbat: "... a Jerusalem in the forest" (Suhl, 1973, p. 29).

Librarians who wish to evaluate fiction for its Jewish content may find the *Instrument to Evaluate Jewish Content in Fiction* (Posner, 1980B), a shortened version of which is appended to this article, of some help. Those who cannot find the time may order the following: *An Index to Jewish Content in Children's Fiction from 1950-1975* (Posner, 1980A), which indexes seventy-five junior novels according to criteria found in the *Instrument*, and my *Juvenile Judaica* (Posner, 1981) which is a fully annotated Jewish concepts' bookfinder, including 435 titles indexed by several hundred subject and value terms. Most of the titles date from 1976. Other aids to identifying Jewish content in fiction are the subject index to Enid Davis' *A Comprehensive Guide to Children's Literature with a Jewish Theme*

(1981), or other topically arranged bibliographies, e.g., *Selected Jewish Children's Books* (Posner, 1982). Reviews which offer insights into fiction beyond the central story or plot can yield the information a librarian needs for "value-analytics" — cards using Jewish values as subject headings which include the pages on which the value may be found within the book.

Some classroom teachers may not be conscious of specific Jewish concepts embodied in the lessons they teach, although many are of course. It might be wise for both librarian and teacher to begin with the *Instrument* and to add additional Jewish concepts as they occur in lessons being planned. In this way the teacher will define the goals of the lesson beforehand: e.g., "to teach a particular portion of Bible and to help the children to understand the values of compassion, humility, and faith contained in this passage..." The librarian can then choose fiction in which the same values are demonstrated in a different context. What the librarian and teacher are actually doing is "team-teaching;" the librarian offering resources for affective learning, and the teacher for cognitive learning. A "Goals Worksheet" is included with this article to help librarian and teacher plan together. (See Figure 1, p. 40).

Some Thoughts About Reader's Guidance, or, Selecting the Right Book for the Right Child

The main thrust of this article is teacher-librarian communication and the identification of appropriate Jewish content in fiction for curriculum use. One more vital step must be considered, however. The right book must be matched to the right child. Usually a book which is elementary for a child's developmental level will bore him, and one that is too mature will not touch him except in a superficial way, by story alone. Kohlberg has written that children are influenced to act on moral decisions by those who are one moral level above their own (Kohlberg, 1968). Dorothy Broderick saw implications for reader's guidance and suggested that the moral levels of literary characters which are slightly higher than the reader's may influence him (Broderick, 1972).

Although I shall not embark upon a discussion of Kohlberg here, knowing the average developmental levels of children according to their chronological age can be helpful. The following is partially excerpted from Huck & Kuhn (1968, pp. 216-217), with some adaptations to Jewish situations.

Developmental Levels of Children With Implications for Reader's Guidance

8-9

Peer group acceptance has become more important. Children are sensitive to criticism, are seeking standards of right and wrong, and are developing consciences. Less egocentric than before, and with a better sense of present and past, simple historical and biographical fiction, and family-oriented stories will have appeal and relevance.

10-11

Children have a better understanding of the chronology of past events and are able to see many dimensions of a problem. Just beginning to challenge authority of parents and teachers, annoyed at siblings, conscious of belonging or not belonging, and prone to exclude the less popular class members from their "cliques." This is the time to introduce stories of bigotry, brotherhood, and antisemitism. In a positive vein, by now there is a heightened interest in reading for information and pleasure, as the mechanics of reading have been mastered.

12 & up

Role models are usually anyone other than parents. Entering adolescence, children are beginning to be concerned about their sexual roles, about their futures, and are looking for identity — self (Erikson, p. 128). Fluctuating between feeling all wise and powerful, or stupid and powerless, they rebel against people, institutions, and ideas they had once respected without question. Now they question everything and are prone to simplistic solutions, and extreme idealism. This idealism needs to be channeled. Logical thinking must be encouraged. Although increased freedom and independence are essential, so too is structure. The adolescent needs someone with whom to try out his ideas and arguments, to butt against, until the authority figures he is testing display resistance.

This is the time to use fiction about young people who are questioning, searching, trying out different roles — historical fiction with heroes and heroines, and stories about young people in trying situations who rise to the challenge. Vivid imaginations, tendencies to dramatize and role-play, and emotions near the surface make teens and youth in their early twenties open to suggestion from those who are different from childhood authority figures, and to idealistic causes. Discussion plus reading aloud should be scheduled frequently. Since the best books in the Jewish library are written for this age level, and because some adult books are suitable, the re-

sources of the Jewish library are plentiful.

Biography and History — non-fiction written with attention to the human drama — can also be used for affective learning.

Summary

Using fiction in the Jewish School adds another dimension to Jewish education. Fiction which simulates experience results in affective learning and can help shape the child's attitude positively towards Jewish education and Judaism. At the very least it can reinforce the cognitive skills taught in the classroom. In order to use fiction in the curriculum, the librarian must first identify Jewish concepts in fiction and be able to retrieve them when needed. The teacher must identify the Jewish concepts in the lessons being taught in the classroom so that both teacher and librarian can coordinate fiction with classroom content. In that way there will be continuity between class and library, cognitive and affective learning, with good possibilities for meaningful discussion of Jewish values and concerns taught in the class and experienced in literature.

Developmental levels of children should be considered when recommending fiction with appropriate content for the experience to have impact. As Hazel Karp writes — "The end result of giving a child a work of fiction is to help him connect with his Jewish self" (letter to the author, August 29, 1983).

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Appendix

Instrument To Evaluate Jewish Content in Fiction (abbreviated version)

Category I — Jewish Survival

- A—Family shows concern about threats to Jewish survival: intermarriage, conversion/cult/missionary activity, zero population growth, loss of Jewish identity; or shows return to stronger Jewish identity.
- B—Exhibition of Ritual Behavior: home and family, rites of passage, holiday and festival observance, synagogue affiliation and attendance.
- C—Involvement in Jewish Education evidenced: study of Torah, prayer, history, language, culture.
- D—Exhibition of survival qualities which are rooted in Jewish philosophy/religion: faith in God, optimism, tenacity, adaptability, wit and humor.

Category II — Sense of Community

- A—Responsibility of one Jew for another: concern for the welfare and civil rights of Jews all over the world; working for organizations having Jewish goals; donating to Jewish causes.
- B—Sense of being a "Different People": pride in being a Jew; awareness of the meaning of the Covenant; enjoyment of Jewishness; feeling of kinship with Jews/Peoplehood; religious and secular roles of Israel recognized; sharing of a common historical experience/to include Holocaust stories.
- C—Remnants of Jewish identity among assimilated Jews: acknowledgement of being a Jew: intellectual and cultural participation in literature, music, and art relating to Jewish themes. Stress on education and abiding by the law; ethnic identification through foods, customs, humor; social participation through friendships, vacation choices, belonging to Jewish associations which parallel non-Jewish associations, e.g. — Jewish War Veterans; rallying to aid (Israel) only in emergencies.

Category III — Tsedakah, Compassion, and Social Justice.

- A—Cares for poor, sick, elderly; shows concern for social justice as rights of the victim, the accused, and inhuman relationships; strong sense of mercy shown by championing of the underdog, the disadvantaged, working towards "Brotherhood," working/giving to non-Jewish philanthropy as well as Jewish philanthropy; warmth and hospitality.

Category IV — Free Will

- A—Man is responsible for his actions: conscious choice between good and evil; thinking independently; exhibits self-control; ethical behavior exhibited in home, school, community, business, government and law; activism and seizing the opportunity politically, economically, intellectually, culturally, and socially (unionism, etc.).

Dr. Marcia Posner is Judaica Library Consultant for the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York and Consultant to the JWB Jewish Book Council.

**A GOALS WORKSHEET FOR
TEACHERS AND LIBRARIANS**

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LIBRARIAN:

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Figure 1

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Recommended in *American Libraries* (July/August 1983).

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Edith Lubetski is Assistant Professor of Library Administration and Head Librarian, Hedi Steinberg Library, Stern College for Women, Yeshiva University. *Meir Lubetski* is Associate Professor of Hebrew Language and Literature, Baruch College, City University of New York.

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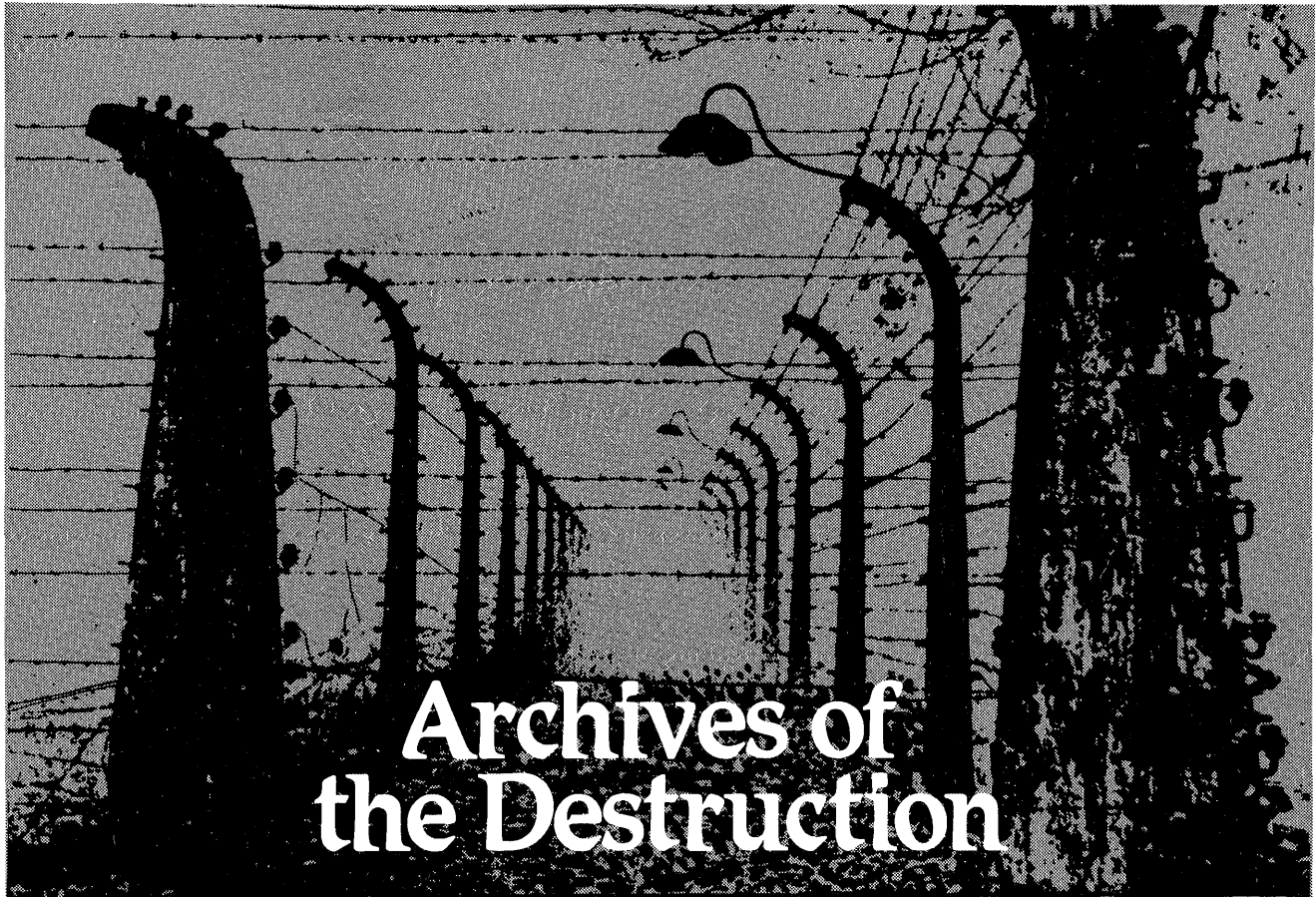
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