

CAJE: Using Mitzvot in Your Pesach Curriculum

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An emergent approach to curriculum can seem a bit more difficult around the time bound Jewish holidays! It is important to remember that when a Jewish holiday is approaching, our students need plenty of time to investigate the holiday. As you are beginning to introduce Pesach to the children in your class, scatter the room with items that pertain to Pesach. Ritual objects, pictures, books, haggadot, and music form the holiday are great things to challenge a child's interest. Depending on the ages of the children that you work with, some of them might begin to remember some things about Pesach, while others will discover for the first time. Either way, be ready to answer the questions that arise as the children explore the "hints" that you have left in the room for the upcoming Pesach holiday. Through your reflections and subsequent observations, you will begin to see what emerges for your children in the celebration of Pesach.

Here again, it can sometimes be difficult to integrate the children's interest in certain aspects of the holiday, from the important aspects of the holiday itself. For example, the children may be very interested in frogs, something that many have us have included as a "science" aspect of the curriculum. But if your curriculum centers only on frogs, then you are losing the most important part of the *Pesach* holiday. One way to work with a more emergent approach to Jewish curriculum is to think about your Pesach curriculum through a lens of Mitzvot, (commandments). While there are eight mitzvot related to the celebration of Pesach, (six concerning the removal of *hametz*, (foods with leavening), one regarding the eating of *matzah*, and one regarding the telling of the story of the Exodus*). In this article we will concentrate on three of those mitzvot for Pesach; Eating Matzah, Eliminating Hametz and the telling of the Pesach story.

Eating Matzah: In the haggadah, during *Maggid*, we are told to lift up the broken piece of matzah and say, "This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let all who are hungry come and eat..." Eating matzah reminds us that we were slaves in the land of Egypt.

This is a wonderful and very practical frame to use with even the youngest of children. Pesach is a spring holiday. Before you begin your study of Pesach, bake a cake for spring. Bake it from scratch.

Count the number of ingredients that go into making a cake.

Measure the cake as the batter is poured in; measure the cake after the cake has baked.

Ask the children any or all of the following questions, and record their answers to use later. (Remember, these are only suggestions. Let your observations guide you as you are working with your own group of children.)

- How many ingredients does it take to make a cake?
- How did the cake change after it was in the oven?
- How big did the cake get in the pan?
- What does the cake taste like?
- What else could we add to the cake to decorate it?
- What does it taste like when we add frosting/ sprinkles, powdered sugar, etc.?
- How do you feel when you eat cake?
- Why do we make cakes?

If you are in a community which has no objections to eating matzah before Pesach, (when in doubt, check with the Rabbi), then make sure to taste all the different kinds that are available.

Matzah is made of two things: flour and water. From the time that the water touches the flour, you have 18 minutes to get it into the oven! This is a great activity to do with the children and a timer. (Beware of the mess, but it's worth it!!) Think about making your matzah close to the kitchen where your oven is located. After you have made your matzah, then you can go back to the questions that you had asked the children when you were making the cake. Compare and contrast. Try eating matzah with other things as well, and chart the likes and dislikes of the children you work with.

During all of this, the most important thing to articulate to the children is that on Pesach, it is a mitzvah to eat matzah. Eating matzah reminds us that we were slaves in the land of Egypt. It reminds us that when we were free, we didn't have time to make bread, we had to leave Egypt quickly! Every hard, crunchy bite takes us back to that time.

Cleaning for Pesach/ Eliminating Hametz: It is a mitzvah to rid our houses (and schools!) of hametz. Again, the articulation of this concept is integral in your work with young children. The preparation for Pesach is huge and in traditional homes begins well before the holiday! In your classrooms there are many different things that you can do to clean up for Pesach. Remember, that this takes time, but it is time well spent. Take a calendar and work backwards from Erev Pesach. This will show you how much time you need to take to prepare your room. Don't rush the experience. Children love to wash and scrub. Water is soothing, and cleaning is something most of our children don't have a chance to do on a regular basis. When you start your cleaning, divide the room into two places: the dramatic play center and everywhere else!

In the dramatic play center, take out your regular dishes and store them away. For Pesach, we use special dishes that have not touched hametz. An inexpensive way to replace your dishes is to use paper plates, and plastic cups and silverware. (Note: have a good supply, as they do not last as long as the plastic ones, and in the week of Pesach, you will go through a lot of paper plates!)

- Wash everything! Shelves, all the items in your dramatic play center, (refrigerator, stove, etc), tables, chairs, pretend food and dress up clothes.
- Sort the plastic food you have in your "house" into Kosher for Pesach, and Hametz.
- Put all the "hametz" into a box and store for the week of Pesach.
- In the rest of your room, go through shelves, cubbies, manipulatives, etc and wash everything. This is spring cleaning personified!!

There are four steps toward ridding your house of hametz. These steps are great for children to participate in at school. These experiences scaffold for children beyond the cleaning of the room/ school which deepens their experience of Pesach. The four steps can be charted and drawn for children so that they can be an active participant rather than a passive observer. These four steps are:

Bedikat Hametz: The night before Pesach, the house is searched for hametz with the following items: a candle, a feather and a wooden spoon. Before the search, pieces of hametz are “hidden” for the children to gather. They walk through the house using the candle for light, and sweeping the pieces of hametz into the wooden spoon with the feather. (While there are kits for this, it is just as easy to put this together yourself.)

There is a formula that we recite, found in the haggadah, and then we save the hametz, (you can put it into a paper bag), and it is burned the next day. Obviously, in the classroom you are not going to be able to do this at night, unless you develop a terrific family education program! To do this in your classroom, you can arm the children with a wooden spoon and a feather, and make sure to “hide” enough pieces of hametz around the classroom for each child to get at least one. (Caution: remember to count how many pieces you put out so that you do not find them during the week of Pesach!!) The teachers can shut off the lights and hold the candle to hunt for the hametz.

Bittul Hametz: After the search for the hametz is concluded, we recite the formula for Bittul Hametz, the nullification of hametz in our possession. This formula can be found in the haggadah, and essentially says that all hametz that is in our possession, whether known or unknown, is ownerless.

Bi’ur Hametz: The next step is to burn the hametz. Check with your Rabbi for the exact time, but this should be done by approximately 11:00 on the day of Pesach. Take the hametz that you had found previously, and using a barbeque or hibachi, put the hametz, the feathers and the wooden spoons into the barbeque.

This is also a great time to use the clergy or a parent to help out with this mitzvah. Light the barbeque, and the hametz will burn. Caution: With fire and hot barbeques, this is something that really needs supervision. If you have a parent who lives close by, this is a great thing to do at their house. If you do this at your site, make sure that you do not light fires in your play yard, or any other place that could be dangerous. This is a great time to ask parents in to help out, as around fire you will want plenty of supervision.

Mekhirat Hametz: It is traditional to use/ give away or destroy all hametz in our possession during Pesach. In most preschools, however, this is not practical. We can use the step of Mekhirat Hametz, which enables us to “sell our hametz” to someone who is not Jewish and “buy” it back at the end of Pesach. Essentially this is a transfer of ownership of the hametz in your school. You seal the hametz up in a cabinet, literally putting a large piece or pieces of masking tape, (I like the blue kind as it doesn’t usually take the paint off the cabinet when you remove it), and before 10:00 am on the morning of Pesach, you sell the hametz to someone who isn’t Jewish.

Usually this is done by the Rabbi or School Director, but make sure that your children are aware and informed of the process. At the very least they can accompany the person selling the hametz, and they could actually sell the hametz that is in their classroom. Obviously, the timing of these mitzvot in Preschool can get tricky. Consult your clergy if you have specific questions about when and how to do these things.

Telling the Story: The last mitzvah for Pesach is telling the story. Again, no matter what your particular group of children have found interesting about Pesach, this is where

is all comes from. This is our history. In the Torah it says, " You shall tell your children on that day saying, 'This is because what Adonai did for ME when I came out of Egypt'" (Exodus 13:8; italics my own) The story of Pesach is told four times during the Seder. It is our time to relive the story.

There are plenty of wonderful resources for telling the story, so the focus here will be using various methods to tell the story. Make the story meaningful to the children you work with Tell it in a variety of ways.

- Use the haggadah that you are going to use at your model seder if you are having one.
- Read the story from a children's book.
- Tell the story with felt board characters,
- tell it with puppets,
- use little plastic figures, (or the Moses action figure!). Make sure that you leave those props out for the children to use to tell the story as well.
- Sing the songs of Pesach, and tell the story through singing.
- Use the tactile table to recreate Egypt, or the making of the bricks the slaves made for the pyramids,
- surround your room with pictures of Pesach, from photos of the pyramids to photos of ritual objects.
- Take the ritual objects out and talk about why we use them.
- Talk about the foods we eat at the Seder and why we eat them.
- In the dramatic play area make sure that you have appropriate clothes for Pesach, particularly to dress as the slaves in Egypt.
- Make matzah, tell the story as you act out leaving the land of Egypt and begin your own Exodus.

Your challenge is to make this story come alive to the children and families in your care.

These are just a few ideas of celebrating Pesach through the lens of mitzvot. Remember to articulate them to your children to keep your Pesach curriculum in focus. This will enable your children and their families to experience the true meaning of the holiday. Chag Samech!