

## IS THE RAINBOW FISH JEWISH? SECULAR PICTURE BOOKS THAT REINFORCE JEWISH CONCEPTS & VALUES

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*Description:* What are the advantages of incorporating secular story books into your collection? How do you find secular books that reinforce Jewish values? How do you make sure your patrons see these books through “Jewish eyes”? We will explore various approaches to using secular picture books Jewishly, and we will see many examples of books that are open to such interpretation.

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### **What are the advantages of incorporating secular story books into your collection?**

My topic today is using secular books in a Jewish context. But, you might say, this is a JEWISH library conference. Why not talk about Jewish books? Admittedly, Jewish books are very important! It is important for Jewish children to see themselves reflected in the literature. It is also important for gentile children to see Judaism portrayed positively and skillfully in books, especially if they don’t have opportunities to meet actual Jewish people. Additionally, Judaic books are critical in helping to pass our traditions and

values on to our children.

This, however, is where my theory comes in: Jewish values can be found all over the place, not just in specifically Jewish books. This realization is especially important in a setting like the one in which I work: very Reform, with many interfaith families. Although they attend Jewish preschool, the world these kids live in is largely secular, and mainstream culture is more familiar and comfortable to them. They like Sammy Spider but they LOVE Clifford the Big Red Dog. Thus, by finding a Jewish interpretation of mainstream materials, we show them that they can embrace their religion without having to feel like outsiders. We allow them to own the mainstream culture, not be visitors to it. We show them that our values are shared with others in the human family. We also show them that Judaism is a way of seeing the world rather than just a series of symbols and holidays (which tends to be the approach with young children).

There are other benefits to using secular books.

- More variety of choices. The small market for Jewish books means that there will probably never be enough Jewish children’s books published to meet our needs.
- Often better produced and more visually attractive than Jewish books, since mainstream publishers tend to have more resources than small Jewish presses.
- Less didactic, since they are less likely to be written with an agenda in mind

The most obvious approach to finding the Jewish core in a secular book is to look for Jewish attitudes and actions among the characters. *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein is the classic example. Although it has no specifically Jewish content, this book can be found in temple libraries and Hebrew schools across the country. What is so Jewish about it? The tree, who gives of herself to the boy she loves, is the embodiment of mitzvah. Looking for mitzvot is a broad but useful tool for identifying Jewish values in secular stories.

My initial approach was to treat the term *mitzvah* as the equivalent of good deed, and I found many secular stories about kindly, helpful characters who “do a mitzvah.” The Rainbow Fish learns to be generous, the Little Engine helps pull the train over the mountain, and those who gather to pull up the Enormous Turnip cooperate admirably. The world of secular picture books offers many, many compelling examples of good deeds, of “being nice,” far more numerous than what is available among Jewish titles.

I have found, however, that when I ask young children to think of ways to “be nice” they start coming up with a list of DON’Ts – “don’t punch” “don’t hit” “don’t push.” I wanted to give them a list of DO’s. So I turned to a more in-depth definition of mitzvot to find examples of specific ways to “be nice.”

My approach to sharing Jewish values with children was influenced by education expert Marilyn Gootman. Dr. Gootman was the keynote speaker at our local Jewish Early Childhood conference in Palm Beach County a few years ago (October, 2000). Her presentation was called “Fostering Developmentally Appropriate Jewish Classrooms” and she discussed ways to create a caring community by giving kids a vocabulary for “social competence.” By labeling common classroom behaviors in Jewish terms we help them learn the subtle variations encompassed within “being nice.” Thus my approach, like hers, is to go beyond the mitzvah=good deed equation, and to seek out examples of specific acts of respect, compassion, peace, hospitality, and so on.

### **How do you identify secular books that reinforce Jewish values?**

In building a values-oriented collection, it is helpful to identify the particular values that you’d like represented in your books. Particularly useful in this regard is Chapter Two of Maxine Segal Handelman’s *Jewish Every Day* (A.R.E. Publishing, 2000), particularly the chart on page 26 reprinted from the Machon L’Morim B’reshit program. Machon L’Morim is a professional development program that helps preschools integrate Jewish components into their everyday programs. (For more information, see [www.machonlmorim.org/overview.html](http://www.machonlmorim.org/overview.html).) This chapter and chart provide descriptions and Hebrew terms for a variety of kid-friendly mitzvot, and make a great starting point for a librarian trying to link mitzvot with literature.

Let’s use *The Little Engine That Could* as an example. What mitzvah can you see in this story? As a Pre-K class pointed out to me, there are two: 1) the little blue engine helps the train get over the mountain and 2) the train brings food and toys to give to the girls and boys on the other side of the mountain. Using the chart, we can see that the engine’s act could be described as a “Righteous Deed” or Gemilut Chasadeem. The giving away of food and toys would, of course, be Tzedakah, described as “Righteous Justice (Charity)” on the chart. Any book in which you see characters behaving kindly and helpfully can be examined in light of a resource like this

chart, to identify the specific mitzvot being performed. If you already have secular story books in your library, you can create a Mitzvah Collection by simply reexamining what you've got.

What if you don't already collect secular books, but would like to buy some that support Jewish values? How do you find titles that fit this description? Translate a Jewish value into English keywords. For example, you can think about Tikkun Olam not only as "repairing the world" but also relate it to the terms "environment" "nature" "recycling" "pollution" "gardening" "cleaning up" and "Earth Day." Try plugging some of those terms into a search on Amazon.com or other literary databases. You'll be given relevant suggestions such as Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*, Graeme Base's *The Water Hole*, and Lynne Cherry's *The Great Kapok Tree*.

Bibliographies can be helpful, although there are few that directly address Jewish values within secular works. A useful AJL publication is Hazel Karp and Rita Frischer's "Literature as a Means of Teaching Values to Children," from their 1999 convention session. There are several mitzvah and values bibliographies available from the AJL Bibliography Bank. However, by once again translating the values into secular terms, we can find a wide variety of bibliographies on "Values" and "Character Education" that address issues such as Responsibility, Honesty, Courage, Tolerance, and so on. Many of these are easily available on the Internet.

Now, before we discuss specific examples of books that represent some of these mitzvot, I'd like to talk about ways that you can promote secular books in your Judaic library.

### **How do you make sure your patrons see these books through "Jewish eyes"?**

There are various ways that secular books can be used to reinforce Jewish themes, and I will admit that I have not yet tried all of the methods I will name. That does not, I believe, invalidate the ideas. Different library situations will call for different approaches. My main goal is to make you aware of some of the possibilities.

If you have a secular collection, you might choose to promote the books by mitzvah through booktalks to teachers and parents, or through bibliographies or newsletter articles. You might even choose to label or shelve books by mitzvah. If your collection is strictly Judaic you might add secular books to the collection under your mitzvah section (Elazar 136.7 and Weine 256).

Specific values can be used as storytime themes. For example, a great storytime on the concept of shalom would be easy to do. By using variations on the concept of peace, you can use stories on "peace and quiet" (*Peace at Last* by Jill Murphy) and on "not fighting" (*I'm Not Going to Chase the Cat Today* by Jessica Harper). You can mix secular and Judaic tales by adding one of the many versions of the "crowded house" story (*It Could Always Be Worse* by Margot Zemach, *Too Much Noise* by Ann McGovern, etc.) You could even play noisy/quiet games. By the end of the session, the children would have a clearer concept of what is meant by "Shalom."

A more subtle approach, but one that could be used more frequently, is to find the Jewish values present in secular themes. For instance, when reading about Community Helpers, you can point out the mitzvot being performed in various jobs: vets are kind to animals (tza'ar ba'alay chayim), doctors visit the sick (bikur choleem), bakers feed the hungry (ma'achil re'ayvim). You can tie seasonal themes to Jewish themes: winter can be related to the need to care for the homeless, spring can be related to spring cleaning/Earth Day/tikkun olam. A nice extension would be to help the children take action and perform some of the mitzvot being read about. For instance, a

theme about animals ties in nicely with the local zoo's adopt-a-critter program or with the pet shelter's collection of dog chow and blankets.

Once you've gotten the children familiar with the mitzvah concept, you can ask them to watch for mitzvot in the books they encounter. An idea I've had on the back burner for a while is the



awarding of a Mitzvah Medal to books identified by the children as deserving recognition. Ask the children to stop you when they see a mitzvah happening in the books you read together. If the group decides that the characters are acting like "menschen" you can place a Mitzvah Medal sticker, easily made on your computer, on the cover. You can invite teachers to do the same in their classrooms, and even offer the stickers to parents so that their children can identify mitzvot in their household storybooks. Not

only does this provide an opportunity for deeper discussion as you are reading, but it gives you the chance to "pay it forward." The next time someone pulls that book off the shelf and sees the Mitzvah Medal, their Jewish consciousness is automatically raised, as they will be watching for the "hidden mitzvah" as they read. The example seen here was created on Microsoft Publisher and printed onto round Avery labels for use at Congregation B'nai Israel in Boca Raton, FL.

Secular books can also be helpful in fleshing out Jewish holiday storytimes. In this case, instead of looking for a core mitzvah, we look for the child's-eye-view of the holiday as our guide. Children do not think of Yom Kippur as the "Day of Atonement," but they can understand the idea of forgiveness and trying to fix mistakes. Stories such as *Mama, Do You Love Me?* by Barbara Joose and *No, David* by David Shannon work very well in this context. Sukkot, the harvest festival, is a nice time to read about fruits and vegetables and about the little houses (sukkahs) they decorate. The party atmosphere of Purim lends itself to tales of celebration and of craziness. Lag B'Omer is the perfect time for picnic stories. Shavuot is a great time to explore some of the commandments with stories about honoring parents, or about being happy with what you have.

When secular books are used in the context of Jewish learning and discussion, and are mixed in with Judaic books about these holidays, you can remain on-target with your holiday storytimes without having to read Sammy Spider over and over!

Specific examples of secular/Jewish books and online booklists are available on related handouts, or on the South Florida AJL web page at [www.angelfire.com/fl/ajl](http://www.angelfire.com/fl/ajl).

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## HANDOUTS

### Character Education Bibliographies Online

About.com's Children's Books Section: [childrensbooks.about.com/cs/valuescharacter/](http://childrensbooks.about.com/cs/valuescharacter/)

TeachingValues.com: [www.teachingvalues.com/childrensbooks.html](http://www.teachingvalues.com/childrensbooks.html)

Action Alliance for Children: [www.4children.org/books.htm](http://www.4children.org/books.htm)

Character Counts!: [www.charactercounts.org/booklist1.htm](http://www.charactercounts.org/booklist1.htm)

Jane Addams Children's Book Award (books that promote peace, social justice, and world community): [www.soemadison.wisc.edu/ccbc/addams/list.htm](http://www.soemadison.wisc.edu/ccbc/addams/list.htm)

The Christopher Award (books "which affirm the highest values of the human spirit"): [www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/christopher.html](http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/christopher.html)

Alibris Used & Rare Books – click on Values on the right-hand menu: [www.alibris.com/subjects/childrens/fiction-home.cfm](http://www.alibris.com/subjects/childrens/fiction-home.cfm)

Education World article “18 books for teaching about character across the grades”: [www.education-world.com/a\\_curr/curr281.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr281.shtml)

Utah State Office of Education Character Education program: [www.uensd.org/USOE\\_Pages/Char\\_ed/resc/bib1-6.html](http://www.uensd.org/USOE_Pages/Char_ed/resc/bib1-6.html)

Utah State Office of Education Character Building Booklist: [www.usoe.k12.ut.us/curr/char\\_ed/stories/books.html](http://www.usoe.k12.ut.us/curr/char_ed/stories/books.html)

Scholastic article “Character Education by the Book”: [teacher.scholastic.com/professional/todayschild/charactered.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/todayschild/charactered.htm)

Teachers.net Character Education Literature List: [teachers.net/lessons/posts/1155.html](http://teachers.net/lessons/posts/1155.html)

Calvert County, MD Public Schools, linked booklists under each value: [www.calvertnet.k12.md.us/instruct/characterdev.shtml](http://www.calvertnet.k12.md.us/instruct/characterdev.shtml)

Michigan State University Extension “Character Development and Education Bibliography”: [www.msue.msu.edu/msue/cyf/youth/cbiblio.html](http://www.msue.msu.edu/msue/cyf/youth/cbiblio.html)

### ***Tikkun Olam*** **Repairing the World**

The Earth and I by Frank Asch  
Common Ground by Molly Bang  
Earth Sky Wet Dry by Durga Bernhard  
One Child by Christopher Cheng  
The Great Kapok Tree by Lynne Cherry  
The Earth is Good by Michael deMunn  
Brother Eagle, Sister Sky by Susan Jeffers

Home Sweet Home by Jean Marzollo  
I Love You Sun by Karen Pandell  
Our Earth by Ann Rockwell  
Each Living Thing by Joanne Ryder

***Hachnasat Orchim***  
**Welcoming Guests**

Loudmouth George and the New Neighbors by Nancy Carlson  
May I Bring a Friend? by Beatrice Schenck de Regniers  
This is the Bread I Baked for Ned by Crescent Dragonwagon  
Sitting Down to Eat by Bill Harley  
Just a Little Different by Mercer Mayer  
Tomas and the Library Lady by Pat Mora  
The Relatives Came by Cynthia Rylant  
Company's Coming by Arthur Yorinks

***Shalom***  
**Peace**

Mean Soup by Betsy Everitt  
And to Think that We Thought that We'd Never Be Friends by Mary Ann Hoberman  
From a Distance by Julie Gold  
Ferdinand by Munro Leaf  
How Humans Make Friends by Loreen Leedy  
Tusk Tusk by David McKee  
Mole Music by David McPhail  
Loving by Ann Morris  
One Light, One Sun by Raffi

***Tzedakah***  
**Righteousness/Charity**

The Berenstain Bears Think of Those in Need by Jan & Stan Berenstain  
Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen by Dyanne Desalvo-Ryan  
Glenna's Seeds by Nancy Edwards  
Stone Soup by Heather Forrest  
Giving by Shirley Hughes  
Tico & the Golden Wings by Leo Lionni  
The Best Night Out with Dad by Lisa McCourt  
The Braids Girl by Lisa McCourt

***Tza'ar Ba'alay Chayim***  
**Kindness to Animals**

I Love You Mouse by John Graham

My Dog Rosie by Isabelle Harper  
Puppy Love by Dick King-Smith  
Mr. Putter and Tabby Pour the Tea by Cynthia Rylant  
The Stray Dog by Marc Simont  
The Big Storm by Rhea Tregebov  
A Lion Named Shirley Williamson by Bernard Waber  
We Love Them by Martin Waddell  
Hunter and His Dog by Brian Wildsmith

***Bikur Choleem***  
**Visiting the Sick**

Farm Flu by Teresa Bateman  
Dr. Duck by H.M. Ehrlich  
A Visit from Dr. Katz by Ursula LeGuin  
Tucking Mommy In by Morag Loh  
Sick Day by Patricia MacLachlan  
Red Riding Hood by James Marshall  
Miss Bindergarten Stays Home From Kindergarten by Joseph Slate  
Feel Better, Ernest! by Gabrielle Vincent  
Sammy and the Robots by Ian Whybrow

***Talmud Torah***  
**Love of Learning**

Wolf! By Becky Bloom  
More Than Anything Else by Marie Bradby  
The Wednesday Surprise by Eve Bunting  
The Art Lesson by Tomie dePaola  
The Day of Ahmed's Secret by Florence Parry Heide  
School by Emily Arnold McCully  
Thank You Mr. Falker by Patricia Polacco  
Hooray for Diffendoofer Day! by Dr. Seuss  
Beverly Billingsly Borrows a Book by Alexander Stadler  
Morris Goes to School by B. Wiseman

***Gemilut Chasadeem***  
**Deeds of Loving Kindness**

Andy and the Lion by James Daugherty  
Dogger by Shirley Hughes  
I Like Your Buttons by Sarah Lamstein  
Lost! by David McPhail  
Because Brian Hugged His Mother by David Rice  
Horton Hatches the Egg by Dr. Seuss  
Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters by John Steptoe

Good Night, Good Knight by Shelly Thomas  
Do You Know What I'll Do? by Charlotte Zolotow

***Kavod***

**Respect, Honor**

Manners by Alik  
Piggybook by Anthony Browne  
The Sunshine Home by Eve Bunting  
Pass the Fritters, Critters by Cheryl Chapman  
The Meanest Thing to Say by Bill Cosby  
Metropolitan Cow by Tim Egan  
What Do You Say, Dear? by Sesyle Joslin  
This is Our House by Michael Rosen  
Hi! by Ann Herbert Scott  
Pierre by Maurice Sendak  
Horton Hears a Who by Dr. Seuss

***The High Holidays***

**(Forgiveness, Fixing Mistakes)**

I'm Not Going to Chase the Cat Today by Jessica Harper  
Jamaica's Find by Juanita Havill  
Mama, Do You Love Me? by Barbara Joose  
Be Gentle by Virginia Miller  
No, David by David Shannon  
David Goes to School by David Shannon  
Let's Be Enemies by Janice May Udry  
The Quarreling Book by Charlotte Zolotow

***Sukkot***

**(Fruits/Vegetables; Houses)**

What's for Lunch? By Eric Carle  
How Are You Peeling? By Saxton Freyman  
A House is a House for Me by Mary Ann Hoberman  
Growing Colors by Bruce McMillan  
We Were Tired of Living in a House by Liesel Moak Skorpen  
Harvest By Kris Waldherr  
Scarlette Beane by Karen Wallace

***Lag B'Omer***

**(Picnic, Field Day)**

It's the Bear! By Jez Alborough  
Clifford's Sports Day by Norman Bridwell  
Norma Jean, Jumping Bean by Joanna Cole

Up to Ten and Down Again by Lisa Campbell Ernst  
Spot's Walk in the Woods by Eric Hill  
What Game Shall We Play by Pat Hutchins  
The Bear Went Over the Mountain by Rosemary Wells