

# Create Drama! Create Involvement! Youth Education through Creative Drama

Isaac Lakritz

National Youth Director, Zionist Organization of America, New York

*Contemporary youth workers must compete with an array of societal allures. When juxtaposed with Pac-Man or pill-popping, piano or poetry, Jewish activities seldom remain high on the list of adolescent priorities. Drama can serve to introduce otherwise arcane ideas.*

## Create Drama! Create Involvement!\*

In most youth work settings a professional is required to expend a great amount of time, energy and resources on youth that seldom appreciate those efforts. A youth leader constantly searches for ways to involve young people. The demand is great for programming that allows teenagers to learn by doing.

Discussed below is a creative drama technique for youth involvement. It is based on a successful project of Masada of the ZOA (Zionist Organization of America), a Zionist youth movement. It created a high quality presentation by involving a significant amount of teenagers in a format that can be duplicated in many youth settings.

### 1. Program Background and Development

Masada of the ZOA is an organization that seeks to involve Jewish youth ages 13-22 in a wide ranging program of Zionist activities. Its ultimate goal is *aliyah*. In the short run it seeks to strengthen the Jewish background and identity of its members. It is a national movement with chapters, *shlichim*, and *madrichim* (group leaders) throughout the U.S.

Masada's winter convention is convened annually, attended by a large portion of its

membership. At this event, elections are held, issues of importance are discussed, old friendships are renewed and new ones are created.

From a programmatic point of view, its educational and motivational value is enormous. Important concepts can be reinforced, new strategies introduced, and enthusiasm generated for activities that will be carried on throughout the year. A successful convention program over the course of a four-day weekend can accomplish goals that might otherwise require far longer periods of time, and the investment of much energy to attain successfully.

This past year, a committee of officers and interested members was formed to plan the convention along with the professional youth workers. The movement attempts to utilize the input and efforts of its members under the guidance of youth leaders to as great an extent as possible. This has been achieved in situations that spark members' excitement.

As discussion of the convention plans continued, various formats were considered that would provide imaginative program possibilities. The concept of Jewish heroism was appealing. It served to combine a number of disparate elements within Masada. The movement, as its name implies, is based on a philosophy of heroic activism. Its *shlichim* come from the Maccabi sports movement, a movement that emphasizes the role of physical prowess in Jewish history. Finally, the convention itself was planned for the week of

\* Special recognition must be given to Igal Carmi, Masada Central *Shaliach*, Mark Smulian, group leader, and Risa Evans, movement activist, for their creative contributions to this project.

Channuka, the festival of Jewish national heroism.

An additional benefit afforded by the theme of Jewish heroism touched upon teenage perceptions of Judaism and Jewish activities. Many disaffected Jewish youth assume that those who participate in such events are not "with it" or are "square."<sup>1</sup> "Judaism is not for the hip" can well serve as the epitaph of the majority of our youth. A presentation about Jewish heroes would directly counter such notions and perhaps serve to lay them to rest.

Since the active participation of a large proportion of Masada members was desired, initial plans centered upon a dramatic presentation of the lives of five or six Jewish heroes, with each individual depicted by a different youth chapter. However, due to practical considerations, actual appearance in the production was limited to individuals within the New York area, where the national office could best coordinate preparations.

The program that evolved was "Jewish Heroism Through the Ages," a dramatic presentation that depicts the lives of five Jewish heroes: Eliezer Ben Yair, Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, Mordecai Anilewicz, and Yonatan Natanyahu. Their exploits are portrayed in a script that is read by two narrators. It is accompanied by pantomime, slides, live guitar music and taped Israeli songs. Israeli folk dances appropriate to the subject on stage fill the transition between the five parts of the show.

The entire presentation takes about 55 minutes. Its full scale production involves 20 people and is most effective when presented on a stage with appropriate lighting and sound equipment. However, it can be adapted so that three people with a slide projector and tape recorder can make the presentation.

Each of the five personalities were studied

<sup>1</sup> Deborah Shore, presentation to Greater New York Jewish Youth Council, December 18, 1981.

and researched by members who eventually became the "stars" of the production, the two dramatic narrators. They participated in writing the script, locating and selecting slides and taped music. The Israeli folk dance and pantomime portions of the production became a special project of one of the New York area Masada chapters (Tenafly, New Jersey) that spent the weeks prior to the convention rehearsing their role under the guidance of the two narrators and professional youth leaders.

The expertise of different individuals of the movement (members, *madrichim*, *shlichim*) from throughout the country was called upon to coordinate various facets of the program: folk dance, lighting, sound, music, etc. As the convention approached and the time for the program's debut neared, a significant portion of Masada sensed that it had contributed to the production and was a part of it.

By the time that "Jewish Heroism Through the Ages" was staged at the 1981 Masada Winter Convention it was almost anti-climactic for the professional workers who were directing the movement. Many of their prime goals of educational involvement had already been realized through the process of creating this multi-media drama. Almost, but not quite, since no one had realized the degree of its effectiveness prior to seeing the completed production. It had a mesmerizing effect upon the audience, consisting of Masada members of varying backgrounds and ages, as well as ZOA adult leadership. The remainder of the convention was structured for involvement in activities centered upon topics and issues that were related to the show.

## II. Conceptual Foundation

The value of youth work cannot be understated. The effectiveness of this means of informal education has long been recognized. Youth groups can involve young people in settings where

new values can be wrought out in the free intimacy not available elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

This is particularly *appropos* for contemporary Jewish settings; youth movements were instrumental in shaping the beginning stages of the Zionist movement.

The professional group leader can realize great potential. Group activities are the means

by which capacity for mutual affection is developed. It [group activities] is the act of the socialization of the self; it is often the way in which an emotional ventilation of pressures and aggression can be harmlessly served.<sup>3</sup>

This can be accomplished by learning experiences that reach out and involve the student. From the classic age of Plato<sup>4</sup> to the Talmudic era<sup>5</sup> to the humanism of John Dewey,<sup>6</sup> a static rote approach has been eschewed.

Professionals serving the Jewish community and attempting to meet the needs of Jewish clientele should base their practice upon solid Jewish methodology. A perusal of our traditional sources indicates that all Jewish rituals and customs, in the most general sense, attempt to involve individuals young and old in observances that reinforce our people's essential principles.

Mere recitation or acknowledgment does not suffice. . . . There is need of symbolic words

<sup>2</sup> Grace Coyle, *Group Work With American Youth*. New York: Harper & Bros., 1948, p. 171.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>4</sup> Note Socrates dialogue with a slave about geometry in the *Meno*.

<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Akiva deliberately stated a *Halacha* incorrectly "to sharpen the wits of his pupils." (*Niddah* 45a)

<sup>6</sup> "If the progress of experimental science has demonstrated anything it is that there is no such thing as genuine knowledge and fruitful understanding except as the offspring of *doing*. The analysis and rearrangement of facts indispensable to the growth of knowledge . . . cannot be obtained purely mentally—just inside the head. Men have to *do* something to the things when they wish to find out something; they have to alter conditions. This is the lesson which all education has to learn." John Dewey, *Democracy in Education*. New York: MacMillan, 1961, p. 321.

and acts which stamp them indelibly [upon the individual's heart and mind]<sup>7</sup>

A clear and resoundingly successful instance of subtle dramatic involvement is the Passover Seder. There are few Jews, regardless of their personal ideology or degree of involvement, who do not look forward to re-enacting our people's liberation in a ritual formulated to elicit the curiosity of its participants.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, the benefit of drama as a component of the educational process has been advocated:

This fusion of natural abilities and acquired skills makes dramatic work with its immediacy of presentation a vivid, direct and unique experience.<sup>9</sup>

Its position in education curricula has had extensive support. Mark Twain once noted:

It is my conviction that the children's theatre is one of the very, very great inventions of the twentieth century, and that its vast educational value—now but dimly perceived and but vaguely understood—will presently come to be recognized . . .

It is much the most effective teacher of morals and promoter of good conduct that the ingenuity of man has yet devised, for the reason that its lessons are not taught wearily book and dreary homily, but by visible and enthusing action; and they go straight to the heart, which is the rightest of right places for them. Book-morals often get no further than the intellect, if they get that far on their spectral and shadowy pilgrimage; but when they travel from a children's theater they do not stop permanently at that halfway house, but go on home.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters* prepared by Jacob Brauer. New York: Feldheim, 1969, p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> Babylonian Talmud *Pesachim* 109a, 114b, *et passim*.

<sup>9</sup> John Allen, *Drama in Schools: Its Theory and Practice*. London, England: Heineman Educational Books, 1979, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> Geraldine Brain Siks and Hazel Brain Dunnington *Children's Theater and Creative Dramatics*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961, p. 29.

How are the goals of youth leaders served by drama?

Drama is an art which nurtures creativity and sensibilities.<sup>11</sup>

The child learns to deepen and challenge his perceptions of himself and his world so that he gradually begins to make sense of the perplexities and subtleties of his experience; acknowledges, accommodates and re-assesses his world view in the light of new experience. The leader assists by enabling the child to use and express himself through the symbolic process of the arts.<sup>12</sup>

Drama is particularly useful as a learning method because it

uses space, objects, light and sound and most importantly time . . . Drama revolves around the process of behavior . . . Acting-out is the exploration and representation of meaning, using the medium of the whole person. It is precisely because of this that drama can be tuned into a variety of topics.<sup>13</sup>

Involvement in a youth group serves a number of functions for the member. Creative drama activities are an ideal method of furthering the process of informal education that is intrinsic to such participation.

In acting, characters of different background stretch the mind and imagination. The child broadens his outlook and judgment. Through the legitimate emotional release which play-making offers, even the mercurial-in-mood adolescent gains self control and confidence. Acting out simple situations . . . or helping to create an original script, the children develop inventiveness, initiative and cooperation.<sup>14</sup>

Rehearsal is a component in this type of work. The child can learn the value of persevering with an activity until it's complete.<sup>15</sup>

In our era of instant gratification such training is essential.

For the professional seeking to impart specific values and outlook to teenagers through the framework of a youth movement or religious school, drama can be a method that serves to remove resistance and apprehensiveness to new ideas. It can nurture hesitant curiosity and latent enthusiasm.

Acting-out involves people making an imaginative leap from their actual situation or role into a supposed one . . . which could represent the conflict in attitudes that interested them.<sup>16</sup>

Contemporary youth workers must compete with an array of societal allures. When juxtaposed with Pac-Man or pill-popping, piano or poetry, Jewish activities seldom remain high on the list of adolescent priorities. Drama can serve to introduce otherwise arcane ideas.

Through drama the child explores problems and issues at the safety of one remove. He distances himself from them by behaving "as if." It is a vicarious involvement by which he can feel sufficiently removed from the issues to reflect on them and get them in perspective, and sufficiently involved, in the "as if" sense, to deepen his understanding of them.<sup>17</sup>

Through representing abstract ideas in symbolic form, the group can make them more concrete as a way of making clearer sense of and also developing and expressing an attitude towards them.<sup>18</sup>

Drama can give life to what is often an inert litany of Jewish tradition and practices.

History is so much more than buildings and an inventory of artifacts. It is a way of living that can only be transmitted to the visitor through exciting his imagination. The dissemination of information, no matter how effective, can no longer do that. We believe

<sup>11</sup> Siks and Dunnington, *ibid*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Lynn McGregor, Maggie Tate and Ken Robinson, *Learning Through Drama*. London, England: Heineman Educational Books, 1977, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> Gertrude Lerner Kermen, *Plays and Creative Ways With Children*. Irvington on the Hudson, New York: Harvey House, 1961, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> McGregor, Tate and Robinson—*ibid*, p. 51.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

that a theatrical experience, a living recreation of history can.<sup>19</sup>

Creative dramatic efforts serve a dual purpose. They teach skills to those who participate while also creating a forum for the group's ideas and philosophy.

Presenting statements to others can be an effective means of communication by performing to wider audiences.<sup>20</sup>

A production starring local youth can vividly mobilize community support for a youth program.

Dramatic activity fulfills psychological and developmental needs of young growing personalities. These include:

- 1) the desire to see the abstract pictures of the imagination realized in concrete form; 2) the craving for a conception of life higher than the actual world offers them; 3) the propensity to express the larger life of the race in the individual; 4) an outlet for the natural drives for adventure and excitement; 5) the need to enter worlds larger than their own and there encounter people different from themselves; 6) the need to experience emotions that might not be evoked in every day living; 7) the imaginative satisfaction of the "ego" and mutuality needs of the growing child; 8) the need to escape from inferiority, rid themselves of handicaps, compensate for weaknesses, fulfill thwarted desires, and enjoy vicarious pleasures and adventures.<sup>21</sup>

Television, movies, and advertising beckon the teenager to avenues of adventure that often conflict with Jewish values and aspirations. Dramatic activities can enlist youth in new experiences that fulfill these vicarious needs.

### III. Application

A group develops in a specific manner. This process can be outlined as follows:

1. Individuals come together for the first time.

---

<sup>19</sup> Vernon Dame, *The Roree Shore*, The Fourwinds Theater, Manhattan Group National Park Service, New York, 1974, p. 2.

<sup>20</sup> McGregor, Tate and Robinson, *ibid.* p. 51.

<sup>21</sup> Siks and Dunnington, *ibid.* p. 28.

2. Emergence of some group feeling, organizing a program.

3. Development of bonds, purpose, cohesiveness.

4. Strong group feelings, goal attainment.<sup>22</sup>

"Jewish Heroism Through the Ages" was a catalyst for molding Jewish consensus and involvement. Drama itself constitutes a process. Its elements are: social interaction, content, forms of expression, and use of the media.<sup>23</sup>

By effectively crafting these components, Masada's youth workers were able to utilize and exhibit the creative talent of its youth. This resource was the production's core and in it lies its success. The concomitant goal of stimulating discussion and activities to impart knowledge about Judaica was achieved, and momentum was created for further activism.

The learning process of the Masada chapter that performed the folk dancing (as described above) is illustrative. This chapter included a large number of new members who were not familiar with Israel, Zionism, Jewish history, etc. As the need to develop dances and pantomime appropriate to the lives of the five heroes arose, these Masada members became increasingly familiar with their lives and historical backgrounds. Even months after the production, upon hearing a name or phrase reminiscent of the script, many of these teenagers will spontaneously begin a rendition of that part of the show.

The Jewish personalities chosen for depiction are by no means representative of historical periods or ideological positions. They were not selected exclusively for this purpose. They were chosen because their lives constituted cogent images to which teenagers could relate. Not only is this "imbalance" part of the charm of such efforts (they are not slickly packaged and

---

<sup>22</sup> Harleigh B. Trecker, *Social Group Work*, New York: Association Press, 1972, p. 67.

<sup>23</sup> McGregor, Tate and Robinson, *ibid.* p. 23.

marketed media presentations), but it can serve to foster discussion about their content.

This drama format is particularly valuable because it can be duplicated in many youth settings. It effectively meets the diverse needs of youth groups. Its structure is flexible in order to accommodate various sized groups, subject matter, and levels of staging ability.

#### IV. Conclusion

Despite the technical virtuosity and unabashed affluence of our time, we live in spiritually impoverished epoch. For many Jews, their heritage has no more practical impact on their lives than an annual check to UJA or a Sunday morning bagel. Our youth continues to disappear, as over 40 percent of Jewish marriages are exogamous. Those who intermarry and remain Jewish may be devoid of the ethics and values with which we as a people pride ourselves.<sup>24</sup>

Our response as a community is not always adequate. Youth activities and Jewish education programs (for all ages) are often conducted within the framework of institutions or organizations that allocate relatively minimal resources for them. Efforts to raise the Jewish consciousness of *klal yisrael* are vital towards guaranteeing our survival as a people. In this post-Holocaust era, we have become sensitized to the dangers of physical annihilation. We

have yet to learn to focus upon those dynamics of destruction that achieve the same end through less violent, though equally efficacious, means.

The convergence of such factors has created a generation of Jewish ignorance in which the Jewish outreach worker is charged with a mighty task. A rabbinic authority of our time has noted that

The "natural" mode of Torah is that of transmission from father to son. The giving of Torah to the *neshamot* (souls) can be transmitted through the Holy One's mouth . . . Where the tradition from father to son has been broken, a generation has fallen out of the chain; then one must arrive at the giving of Torah to the *neshamot*. When a teacher successfully extracts what is noble from what is worthless and leaps over the lost links in the chain, this indicates that he has had the fortunate opportunity to be engaged in the giving of the Torah to *neshamot*. His mouth becomes like the mouth of the Holy One: "If you extract the noble from the worthless, like My mouth shall you be" (Jer 15:19).<sup>25</sup>

Jewish communal workers serve more than an agency, more than their communities. They serve *klal yisrael*. As a result of this sublime responsibility, they must strive to incorporate techniques that are worthy of our people's history and traditions. The force of drama can be marshalled in the contemporary struggle to give Jewish meaning to the lives of our teenagers.

---

<sup>24</sup> Judith Erickson, "A Profile of Jewish High School Students—1980" from *The High School and Beyond Study* of the National Center for Education Statistics, Boy's Town, Nebraska, p. 18.

---

<sup>25</sup> Shalom Carmy, "Rav Yitzhak Hutner's Lecture to a Teacher's Conference," *Tradition*, Volume 19, Number 3 (Fall, 1981), p. 218.