

JEWISH EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

because educators think before they teach

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Building Jewish Identity: Selfhood and Peoplehood

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Perspective on Jewish Education

Avraham Infeld



Reality Programs for Jews who Think

Shlomo Horwitz

Shlomo Horwitz has been using drama to draw youngsters, teens, collegiates and adults into an experience that helps them to rethink and shape their identities.

The Concept

Jewish Crossroads (www.jewishcrossroads.org) is an educational theater project whose goal is to get Jews of all ages personally involved in the Jewish Experience. By 'Jewish Experience' I mean historical and current events as well as philosophical issues that relate thinking Jews to their Jewish identity. By 'educational theater' I refer to the use of theatrical characters from different points in history who interact and engage the audience in an attempt to bring the issues alive. Jewish Crossroads has been privileged to present its performances to thousands of people across the United States, Canada and England. Our school-aged audiences have ranged from lower school to middle and high schools, and our adult audiences have ranged from college students to senior citizens. Jewish Crossroads is non-denominational and has been presented to the gamut of Jewish stripes, eliciting positive comments from Reform, Conservative and Orthodox educators and participants.

Genesis

The idea for this program was born on a family trip to Williamsburg, VA, home of the pre-Revolutionary British Colonial capital. Rather than the dry and boring

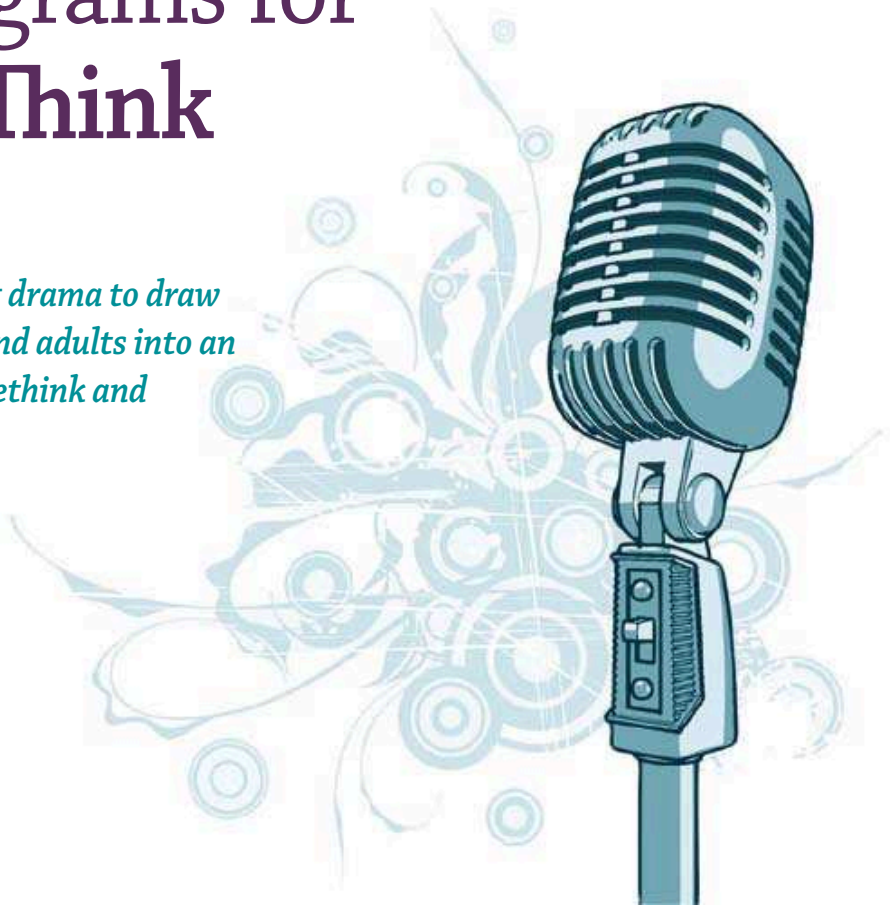
restored old town we expected, we saw live actors in period costume who regaled us with witty and informed commentary on events from the 1760's "as they were happening". I approached one such actor feeling somewhat cynical at what I thought to be just another tourist trap. The cynicism disappeared in seconds as the actor drew me in with his passionate description of his role in the French and Indian War. My wife had to drag me from the spot a half hour later. We eagerly lapped up live courtroom dramas that were meticulously based on historical records and met a host of authentic characters from the time.

Driving back, my wife and I discussed the possibilities of creating a learning

experience for Jews of all ages that would ignite their involvement with the use of authentic characters. What if authentic historical records could be researched allowing ancient rabbis and Jewish statesmen to come to life? The vast array of Jewish scholarship and responsa literature over the last few millennia could be mined for compelling insights on many issues that have always faced the Jewish people. And so began Jewish Crossroads.

What a Character

Our goal has been to create standalone units that impart crucial lessons on pivotal events in Jewish history, current ideological issues and important philosophical concepts that every Jew



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should ponder. A typical Crossroads session may feature one or more of the following live characters (partial listing):

- a slave in Pharaoh's Egypt
- a Messianic rabbi
- Maimonides
- a Palestinian campus activist
- one of our patriarch Abraham's converts
- an Israeli fighter pilot on his return from bombing the Iraqi reactor in 1981
- Rabbi Akiba
- Rabbi David ben Zimra commenting on the lost tribes of Israel in the 1500's
- an extreme animal rights activist from PETA
- a Nazi sympathizer criticizing the Talmud in 1936.

Theatrical Aspects and Advantages

In sixteen years of programming, we have seen that no matter the age, people love to

unreceptive to a particular idea. The addition of authentic Jewish sources and concepts shows the audience how Judaism is alive and speaks to their sense of self.

Take, for example, the effect of the Internet on our students. While the Internet has myriad positive uses, we all know that even the best students can fall prey to pornographic and other inappropriate websites. Typically, students do not react well to moralistic discussions of these dangers. For this reason, Jewish Crossroads has developed an indirect methodology in consultation with mental health professionals and presented it to over 1,000 teens in the US and England. Feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive.

Jewish Identity and Divine Providence

One great way to build Jewish identity with a drama-based program is to re-enact inspiring stories of heroism from both the

#8, with great affection. That would be Col. Ilan Ramon, z"l, a proud Israeli and proud Jew, who demonstrated his dynamic Jewish identity years later in outer space as the world watched him recite Kiddush and light the Menorah.

Next we meet the great Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher of 13th century Spain, who shares his insights about man's responsibility for preparing for war despite his faith in the Almighty. He shows the relevance of King Solomon's proverb about first readying the best horse for battle, and then relying upon God to actually win. After that we hear from Rabbi Moshe Luzzatto of 18th century Italy as he explains the reason we must seriously engage in human effort while maintaining our faith, and that prayer itself is actually a potent form of human effort.

Potiphar, master of Joseph, enters the stage and shares insights about Joseph's ability to involve the Almighty in his

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Personally, I have trouble remembering what I had for supper last night, but I can vividly recall episodes of Seinfeld or the Honeymooners seen decades ago, not to mention really great car chases or Bruce Lee busting up an enemy karate school in Hong Kong. Dramatic or comedic presentations live on in our psyche long after the events were viewed or witnessed. It therefore seems like a simple but powerful idea to harness this concept and use it to teach about Jewish life, history and values.

One advantage to this approach not always available to the traditional educator is the 'backdoor' it provides to reaching an audience that may be otherwise

recent and distant past, and to attempt to understand them in light of classic Jewish philosophical concepts. One such example is *Raid on the Sun*, which brings to life the Israeli Air Force's daring attack on Saddam's nuclear reactor on June 8, 1981 with eight F-16's armed with 2 bombs each. Here is a brief description of the characters:

First we meet Yisrael Shafir, the seventh fighter pilot in the bombing formation, and he tells the frightening tale of war and intrigue, firsthand, sketching the geopolitics which set the stage for the threat and the attack. Audience members are recruited to play the "parts" of Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Red Sea, so the rest of the audience can sense the odds facing the IAF in terms of flying over 600 miles of enemy airspace. Shafir describes the anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles that threatened his buddies and him, and mentions his wingman, Pilot

everyday affairs. Based on the teaching of *Midrash Tanhuma*, the Potiphar character shares that Joseph would constantly pray throughout the course of the day at the palace, asking God for assistance with everything he did.

The presentation concludes with the return of Yisrael Shafir who describes the end of the mission, and then shares shocking and recently declassified information about the raid which brings the Almighty's hidden involvement to light in amazing ways.

The "take home" message from such a program is multifaceted. On one hand, Jewish pride is fostered by the amazing story of courage in our recent history, with prominence given to Ilan Ramon and the other heroes on that mission. On the other hand, while Israeli courage, skill and ingenuity are highlighted, this is balanced by some basic Jewish philosophical concepts about how God expects us to do our best, yet realize that true success

Reality Programs for Jews who Think

comes from Him alone. This concept applies way beyond combat to all areas of life, such as earning a livelihood, seeking medical help for an illness, etc.

This program has been successfully presented to audiences consisting of students, adults and even a mixed audience of parents and children.

One graduate professor of education who attended this program commented: “The deeper lessons regarding faith, persistence and moral responsibility were presented in the words of the Ramhal (Luzzatto) and Rabbenu Bahya in a manner that brought their insights alive using a uniquely creative teaching style that students will find compelling and easy to absorb.”

Tools for University – “Jihad” and “Holy Ghost”

Other topics in demand for student audiences include “Jihad”, an encounter with a ‘Palestinian campus activist’ or “Holy Ghost”, a chat with a ‘Messianic Jew’. These programs attempt to replicate some of the Palestinian or missionary propaganda that students may face at university, but in a safe environment. An emotional barrage of authentic argumentation is unleashed upon the audience, based on a thorough analysis

of Palestinian and missionary sources, respectively. While some students respond more eloquently than others, I often encounter blank stares, since most of the audience has never been prepared for this type of onslaught. I was once nearly physically attacked when presenting the Palestinian side, and on another occasion, hotel security was once summoned to eject me as ‘missionary’ from a New Jersey hotel during Passover!

After the emotional part, the students are presented with a detailed, step-by-step sober deconstruction of all the argumentation, showing the inherent flaws and prejudices. (Note: When discussing the Palestinian side, rather than tar all Palestinians with a broad brush, I do distinguish between those terrorists who wish harm to innocent civilians and those who suffer due to the behavior of the terrorists.)

Feedback on the Internet, Palestinian, and Missionary programs has been positive. One public school student in Boston said:

I really enjoyed your program! My favorite part was probably when you put yourself into the character of a teenager faced with problems that teens go through everyday. It really let us teens connect to you more, because it seemed like you understood what we as a group go through. I also enjoyed the way you presented the problem of missionaries for Jews for Jesus...I definitely feel more prepared to face the challenges ahead!

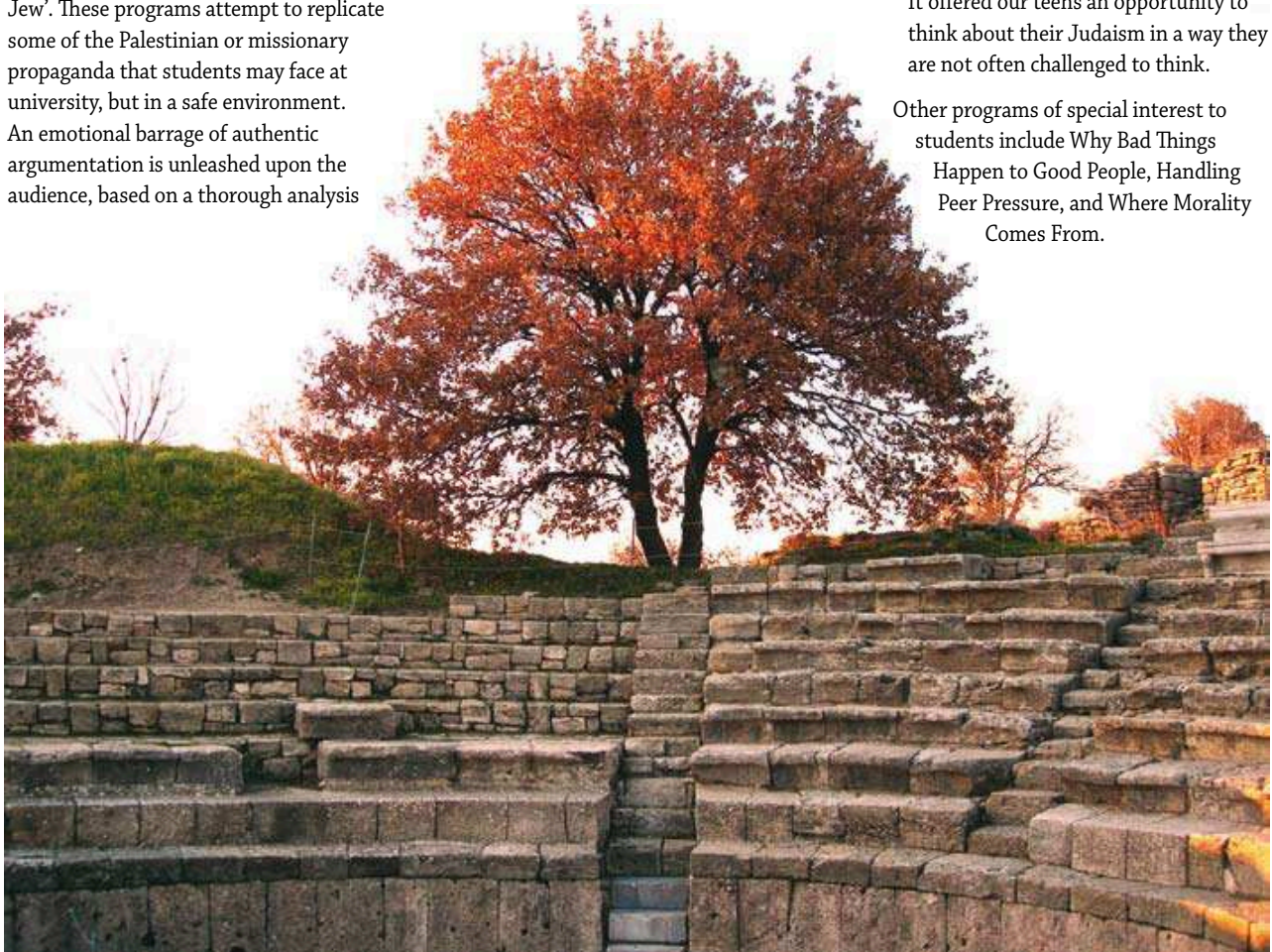
Another student in Seattle commented:

Your presentation taught me a lot and I will now be a lot more careful and cautious while searching the web. Thank you so much again for taking the time to come to our school.

And a NFTY Regional advisor noted:

The program for our participants was an engaging and eye-opening experience. It offered our teens an opportunity to think about their Judaism in a way they are not often challenged to think.

Other programs of special interest to students include Why Bad Things Happen to Good People, Handling Peer Pressure, and Where Morality Comes From.



Lessons from History

Educational theater is uniquely suited to bringing history and its lessons alive. For adults, this type of program can enhance the audience's sense of belonging and give more meaning to their Jewish lives.

Some of topics covered by Jewish Crossroads' history sessions and their descriptions include

Raiders of the Lost Tribes – Which tribe are you from? Admit it, unless you're a Kohen or Levi, you haven't a clue. That's because most of our ancestral Israelite tribes have been lost forever... or have they? This presentation brings to life five characters, who tell the story of just how the tribes got lost. We begin with "eyewitness testimony" of the rift in the ancient kingdom of Israel into factions in the North vs. South. The Prophet Ezekiel stops by to share his vision regarding the rift and its possible healing. We encounter Eldad of the Tribe of Dan, who showed up uninvited in Tunisia in the year 880, telling fantastic stories of magic rivers and nasty cannibals (who tried to have him over for lunch). Listen to R' Menasseh ben Israel, a Dutch rabbi originally of Portuguese descent, as he weighs in with the view that the Lost Tribes can be found... in Ecuador! Trace the tragic story of our brothers and sisters and examine the evidence of where they might be today. Will they ever return? Does it matter?

Convert or Die! – Meet Tomás de Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor of Spain in the 1480s and hear how he explains why torture was a 'favor' for wayward heretical souls. Learn of the enormous pressure which caused hundreds of thousands to publicly renounce their faith and accept the cross. Hear King Ferdinand read his Edict of Expulsion in 1492. See how rabbis of

the time did their best to tend to their flock of both professing Jews and Marranos who made the momentous decision to return. This program ends with a poignant look at where the Marranos are today, and their attitude to their Jewish origins. Hear from the man who 'discovered' Marranos in a distant corner of Portugal in 1917, as well as from a Crypto-Jewish woman from San Antonio, Texas in 2002 as she struggles with guilt over her ancestors' choice to take what she calls 'the easy way out'.

Participants in the history series have reported that they found the programs meaningful. One adult participant in Baltimore commented, "Thank you for making history come alive."

Drama as a Catalyst for Further Study

Personally, the most gratifying use of this program has been when a school or adult education group has treated it as a catalyst for further study. Because each program is based upon a generous helping of ideas found in Jewish sources, those can be made available in advance to the teachers and students, and a teaching unit may be built around the theatrical portion.

Summary

Educational theater is a great and largely untapped medium through which we can reach our students and share many of Judaism's most beautiful teachings. In terms of fostering Jewish identity, dramatic programming can put students in touch with pivotal points in modern and ancient Jewish history and leave them with lasting impressions from which they may draw inspiration.