

Introduction

Sitting by a tent constructed from a tablecloth draped over an easel, Joshua and Rachel are dressed as Avraham and Sarah as we are learning Torah in my early childhood classroom. Outside, children from the first grade are peeking in my room as they walk down the hall. I hear Shira. “Hey, I remember when I was Sarah. Do you remember when I had a baby when I was, like, 90 years old? They’re so lucky they get to do this!” Their teacher comes out of her room, reminding her students that they were only sent to their cubbies to get their snack. What’s taking so long!

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Teaching Torah to young children is both exhilarating and challenging. It’s my favorite part of the school day! Having the opportunity to be the facilitator of a child’s first encounter with a lifetime of Torah study is an awesome experience for me: using contemporary early childhood techniques to present an ancient text that has been handed down through the generation, touching the lives of every Jew...WOW!

This task, however, is not as easy as it may seem. While we might think of the Torah as a text filled with “stories”, these are not necessarily lessons that are easy to present at this young age, or at any age. Tradition teaches that every story, every word, and every letter are written in the Torah for a reason. I like to believe that the Torah purposely deals with very difficult, delicate, and controversial topics so that we may address these issues in the context of a learning environment, whether it be in school, synagogue, or at home.

The lessons described in *Torah Alive!* are ones that I use in my own teaching of four, five, and six year old children at the Bet Shraga Hebrew Academy, in Albany, New York. There is always a level of excitement in my classroom I take out the new costumes and props in preparation for the next installment of Torah learning. “Who are we learning about today?” is a common question. As the children dress in their biblical costumes and place themselves among the background, scenery, and props of the particular story, they step into the Torah text, and the Torah comes alive!

Torah Alive! provides the teacher, students and parents the opportunity to study Torah in a style appropriate for young children by confronting issues that we face in our lives every day, in a playful and creative manner. Through involvement in carefully prepared hands-on experiences with the stories from the Torah, young children are able to learn, along with teachers, friends, and family, from the experiences and lives of their foremothers and forefathers. As they experience the Torah text, God’s wonders and our ancient history are brought into their lives. Each year, as students hear, learn, and discuss the same stories, bringing a year’s worth of new personal experiences to a different learning environment, the discussion and the insights take on new meaning.

Through the use of the *Parent Connection* the teachers, students, and parents become partners in this exciting learning process. The parents of your students will never have to ask their children, “What did you learn in school today?” Instead, they will be able to say, “I know what you learned from the Torah today! Let’s do a project together!” Parents, along with your students, will be eager to share the satisfaction and joy of acquiring new knowledge and insights through the study of Torah.

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It's a hot day at the end of June in Albany, New York. The beautifully illustrated "Wall Torah" has been taken down and placed on the floor. The children sit on the floor around their beautiful artistic interpretations of the stories they have learned from the Torah. Candy is strewn across the artwork, reminding each child of the sweetness of Torah study. Struggling to sit on the tiny chairs of our classroom, surrounding the children, are *kvelling* parents, bursting with pride, as each child answers questions about the lessons we learned from the *Torah*. With every question I ask, hands fly in the air. The parents are amazed at the amount of Torah the children have internalized. Our review is finished and we roll up our Torah. We form a circle, dancing and singing through our tears, as each parent passes the Torah to his or her own child. The Torah has made its way around the circle. It has been lovingly kissed and hugged as it passes through the tiny hands and the larger hands. We end our celebration, thanking God for being able to share this special event in our lives. This has truly been a *Shehecheyanu* moment.

Abraham and Sarah and Their Visitors

Ahvraham V'Sahrah V'Orchim ~Genesis 18:1-15 and 21:1-3



Introduction

Avraham and Sarah are now quite old (almost 100!) and have become well known in Cana'an for their hospitality. Their tent was open on all four sides to let people know that they could come for learning or visits at all times. Avraham and Sarah are very happy in Cana'an, but they are sad because they do not have any children and know that they are too old to have any. From this story, we become aware of the importance of *Hachnasat Orchim*, hospitality to guests.

Synopsis

One very hot day, Avraham is sitting in front of his tent, while Sarah is inside. In the distance, he sees three strangers walking toward the tent. Before the strangers arrive at the tent, Avraham gets up and goes out to greet them. He asks them to sit in the shade of his tree and offers them food and drink. Sarah prepares bread and Avraham brings it to the strangers. They ask, "Where is Sarah?" When Avraham tells them she is in the tent, they say, "We are messengers (angels) from God. Tell Sarah, even though she is very old, she will have a baby." When Avraham tells Sarah the news, she laughs! She can't believe she'll have a baby at 90 years old! Months later, she gives birth to a baby and they name him Yitzchak which means "he will laugh."

Cast and Costumes

- Avraham and Sarah in robes. Avraham has a white beard.
- Three messengers/angels in robes

Scenery and Props

- Cana'an backdrop
- The tent with 4 sides propped open.
- A tree near the tent
- Food and drink on a tray
- Baby doll



Suggested Scene and Narration

Narrator: One hot day Sarah is sitting inside the tent. Avraham is sitting outside. *(The strangers are waiting in another part of the room.)*

Avraham: What a hot day! Look, Sarah, there are 3 strangers coming toward our tent.

Narrator: The 3 strangers are walking slowly toward the tent.

Avraham: I'm going to go and see if they would like to rest at our home.

Narrator: Walking quickly toward the strangers, Avraham goes to greet them.

Avraham: Would you like to sit in the shade of my tree? Please sit and I'll get you some food and drink. *(Avraham walks to tent)* Sarah, please fix some bread, and food, and drink for our guests. *(Sarah hands Avraham a tray of food and drink)*

Sarah: Avraham, here's some food for our guests. *(Avraham brings food to strangers.)*

Avraham: Please have some food and drink.

Strangers: *(taking food)* Where is your wife?

Avraham: She's in the tent.

Strangers: We are messengers from God. You and Sarah are very kind. Tell Sarah, she will be having a baby.

Avraham: *(going to tent)* Sarah, these three people are messengers from God. They said you will be having a baby.

Narrator: Sarah begins to laugh.

Sarah: *(laughing)* I'm not going to a baby. I'm so old!

Narrator: *(gives the baby doll to Sarah)* Months later, Sarah gives birth to a baby boy. They named him Yitzchak which means "he will laugh."

Discussion Questions

- Why was Avraham and Sarah's tent open on four sides? **(It was open on all 4 sides so people from all directions would know that they could receive Avraham and Sarah's hospitality at any time.)*
- How did Avraham and Sarah treat the guests?
- What did we learn about being kind (hospitable) to guests in our house?
- Why did God make it possible for Sarah to have a baby, even though she was really old? **(God intended for them to be the father and mother of the Jewish people and they needed a child.)*

Puppets

- Fashion new clothes for the angels.
- A tent made by folding construction paper or drape fabric over a chair.

Related Activities

Avraham and Sarah's tent

Fashion a tent with four openings to remind us of *Avraham* and *Sarah's* hospitality.

1. Use one piece of 9"x12" construction paper and one piece of 8 ½" x 11" copy paper.
2. Place the smaller sheet in the center of the larger sheet. In each corner, staple the white paper to the construction paper.
3. On the white paper only, cut a flap, approximately 3" wide and 2 ½ " deep in the middle of each side. Turn the flaps up. This will become *Avraham* and *Sarah's* tent.
4. Under each flap, the children may draw something that may be offered to guests to show them hospitality.
5. In the center of the paper, they may draw a picture of Avraham and Sarah.

Special Guest Chair

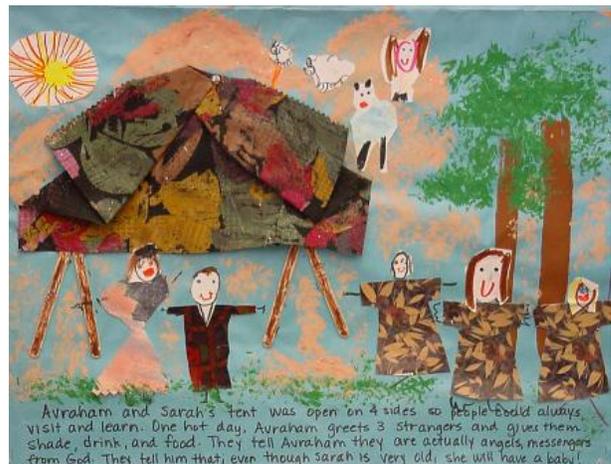
Children will enjoy decorating an old chair to use when special guests, *orchim*, visit the classroom. The children will enjoy giving suggestions as to how the chair may be decorated. Generate a list of guests to invite for a special snack.

Special Snack

Children love to make and knead yeast dough. Bread or pita would be fun to make for snack. Invite *orchim!*

Wall Torah

Continuing the Wall Torah, invite children to draw Avraham, Sarah, 3 strangers, trees, sheep, food for the guests, and a hot sun. A tent may be fashioned from fabric or paper. Arrange the drawings, collage style, to describe this scene.



Parent Connection

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Discussion Questions

- What did Avraham and Sarah do to show hospitality to the strangers?
- The Torah teaches us to be kind to guests, but we need to be careful when meeting strangers. Discuss the difference between guests and strangers in our own homes.

Related Activities

Hachnasat Orchim - Hospitality to guests.

What can our family do to make guests feel welcome in our home?

- Help your child make a special welcome sign or picture to be used next time guests come to the house.
- Bake cookies for your next visitor. They can be frozen and be ready to use at any time.
- Invite guests over for Shabbat dinner and involve your child in the preparations.