



One Small StoraHStep for the Y, One Big StoraHStep for the World

by Stephen Hazan Arnoff and Kiki Schaffer

FOUR-YEAR-OLD KIM RUNS DOWN THE HALLWAY TOWARDS A BIG BLUE PUPPET, gives the puppet a high five and asks, “Hey Elijah – do you remember me from the Passover play?” Elijah, four feet tall and operated by Storahtelling’s Shawn Shafner, nods with enthusiasm. “Of course I remember you, Kim! How was your *seder*?” Kim and her friends at the 14th Street Y Preschool have had ample chances over this past year to play with Elijah and other biblical characters as part of the new residency of the Storahtelling Company at the Y. For Kim and her family, the ongoing Storahtelling programs offer an exciting and accessible connection to Jewish stories and rituals in a whole new way.

The story of this successful new collaboration begins, like many stories, with a crisis.

In September 2009, like so many other non-for-profits, Storahtelling, the New York City-based company famous for innovative and arts-focused Jewish education programs, was facing a decrease in funding. In a strategic move that would cut down costs and leverage collaboration with other like-minded organizations, Storahtelling’s Executive Director Amichai Lau-Lavie called Stephen Hazan Arnoff, the Director of the 14th Street Y, a Jewish Community Center in Manhattan’s East Village, with a proposal for partnership. Storahtelling and the 14th Street Y already had over a decade of success with a variety of collaborative cultural and educational programming together – and it was time for a strategic alliance.

As the alliance between the 14th Street Y and Storahtelling took shape in the fall of 2009, both teams quickly understood that what had initially emerged as a mutually beneficial partnership of innovative programming and stable infrastructure could produce a model Jewish early childhood educational initiative for this and other communities.

Using the Y infrastructure and the hundreds of families affiliated with its early childhood program as a living laboratory for innovative Jewish education, this past year the Y and Storahtelling senior staff have engaged in study, training, discussion, and public programming, creating a replicable structure for young families to explore core narratives, rituals, and values of the Jewish heritage in accessible and meaningful ways. The result of these efforts is Storahtelling's newest program: StorahSteps.



Aimed at 2-to 5-year-olds and their caregivers and families, StorahSteps uses Storahtelling's successful Maven Method™ to integrate Jewish learning, performing arts, and elements of the Reggio Emilia early childhood philosophy practiced at the Y. StorahSteps stems from a growing awareness in the Jewish community that preschool is a critically under-resourced gateway into Jewish content and identity. By providing a framework for pluralistic, dynamic, biblical literacy at a formative developmental stage of preschool, StorahSteps empowers early childhood educators with tools to make Jewish life accessible for young families.

THE PARTNERS

This project is a fusion of what we believe are the proven strengths of each partner's educational practices.

For more than ten years, Storahtelling has been recognized as a pioneer in creative Jewish education, making Judaism's central narratives and traditions accessible to and relevant for people of different ages, genders, and beliefs – on their own terms and in their own languages. Storahtelling is especially powerful among the lesser-affiliated members of the community – advancing Judaic literacy, personal growth, and social consciousness.

Founded in 1999 by Amichai Lau-Lavie, an Israeli-born Jewish educator and performance artist, Storahtelling has presented over 2500 innovative programs worldwide. Rooted in its signature pedagogy – the unique Maven Method™ – Storahtelling integrates classical Jewish learning tools with contemporary stagecraft and new media, continually informing and transforming the ways modern Jews connect with their cultural and spiritual birthright.

In the past decade, Storahtelling has become an international network of emerging leaders and change agents of great impact, invigorating Jewish identity through leadership training programs and performances for multi-generational audiences. Storahtelling's success is recognized as a replicable model for incorporation of the sacred into the modern secular marketplace of ideas.

The Parenting, Family, and Early Childhood Center at the 14th Street Y lies at the heart of a tightly knit community in which emotional security and trust form the foundation for learning, and deep respect for children, parents, and caregivers flourishes. The program serves as a safe and comforting "holding environment" where freshly-hatched parents can formulate and practice their new identities. Strong education and support for the adults yields positive outcomes for the well-being of the children.

The Reggio Emilia approach to early education is a core element within the Y's toddler classes and preschool. In the Reggio approach, children have a significant voice in what they are learning. Furthermore, learning happens through direct experiencing and sensing of the world. We emphasize children's abilities to problem-solve together with their classmates and teachers, honoring improvisation and spontaneity. Investigative play gives rise to open-ended projects that unfold slowly over time as part of a learning tone that is collaborative rather than didactic. Even the environment becomes a "third teacher."

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The Jewish identity of the Y community is non-traditional, reflecting the diversity of the neighborhood. Families within the 14th Street Y Preschool are most responsive to the perspective of Jewish values that thrives in concert with the contributions and beliefs of the many other cultures and religions represented in the community. Serving more than 25,000 unique users each year – and with a membership base that has expanded by some 1000 memberships since a renovation completed in September 2009 – the Y is fertile ground for programmatic experimentation of all kinds. Early childhood programs are an integral part of this overall arc of innovation.

THE NEED

refresh the need for intelligent, interesting content engaging young children and their families. This is particularly true with regard to the tools required for telling stories and introducing 2 to 5-year-olds to their religious and cultural heritage, using Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP).

Early childhood educators must continually

Recent research points to early childhood educational programs as critical not only for healthy emotional and intellectual development, but also for the assimilation of critical social skills, cultivation of imagination, and identity formation.

CORE ELEMENTS OF THE PROGRAM

The first phase of StorahSteps' development consisted of four day-long training workshops during the pilot program year (October '09-June '10) for the staff of the Parenting, Family, and Early Childhood Center at the 14th Street Y – including the 14th Street Y Preschool – led by Storahtelling senior educators. This training program engaged a cluster of early childhood educators at the Y suited to learning the Storahtelling Maven Method™ and incorporating it into their continuous work with children and families.



The training programs exposed the Y educators to the Maven Method™ through a series of hands-on sessions and conversations, while also engaging the educators in progressive practices entailed in the Reggio Emilia approach and a variety of dramatic techniques. The Y educators also were trained to join the Storahtelling staff and help lead the early childhood elements of the ongoing StorahSteps programs held monthly at the Y.

These free monthly events at the 14th Street Y, on *Shabbat* afternoons from 2:00 to 3:30 p.m. in the 2010-2011 programming year and at 11:00 a.m. on Sunday afternoons in the 2011-2012 year, target young families in and outside of the Y community. Featuring highlights from the *Torah* portion of that particular week or a particular holiday during the month of the event, this ongoing series provides a practicum for Y staff to engage their new Storahtelling Maven Method™ skills in a large communal setting, led and assisted by the Storahtelling team.

PROGRAM GOALS

StorahSteps outlines the following core goals that distinguish it as a unique and replicable approach for building the strengths of two new and eager partners:

- To make ancient stories and traditions accessible to new generations, advancing Judaic literacy and raising social consciousness
- To address growing awareness that preschool is a critically under-resourced gateway into Jewish content and identity
- To provide a Jewish lens for engaging processes of healthy emotional and intellectual development, assimilation of essential social skills, cultivation of imagination and identity formation that general early childhood development research asserts is critical
- To engage the breadth, depth, and diversity of both families of preschoolers and the wider 14th Street Y community in finding meaning in the Jewish master Story



CONCLUSION

When Kim first met Elijah, the blue puppet, she didn't know who he was or what he had to do with Passover. But since that time, Kim and her friends have gotten used to meeting Elijah and the other StorahTelling actors and puppets – not only on stage at the Y, but also in the corridors on a daily basis. These ongoing programs have been instrumental in giving these children and their families a sense of continuity and connection to Jewish life, and to their own dynamic community.

Too often, early childhood education programs in Jewish contexts fail to cultivate the richness and depth of more general progressive approaches to education. By combining the tenets of Reggio Emilia and the nurturing philosophy of the 14th Street Y early childhood programs with StorahTelling's best practices in re-imagining Jewish text and tradition, we believe we have discovered in StorahSteps a model for Jewish early childhood experiences that not only will serve and delight our own community, but also can be cultivated to meet a critical need in the wider world.

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