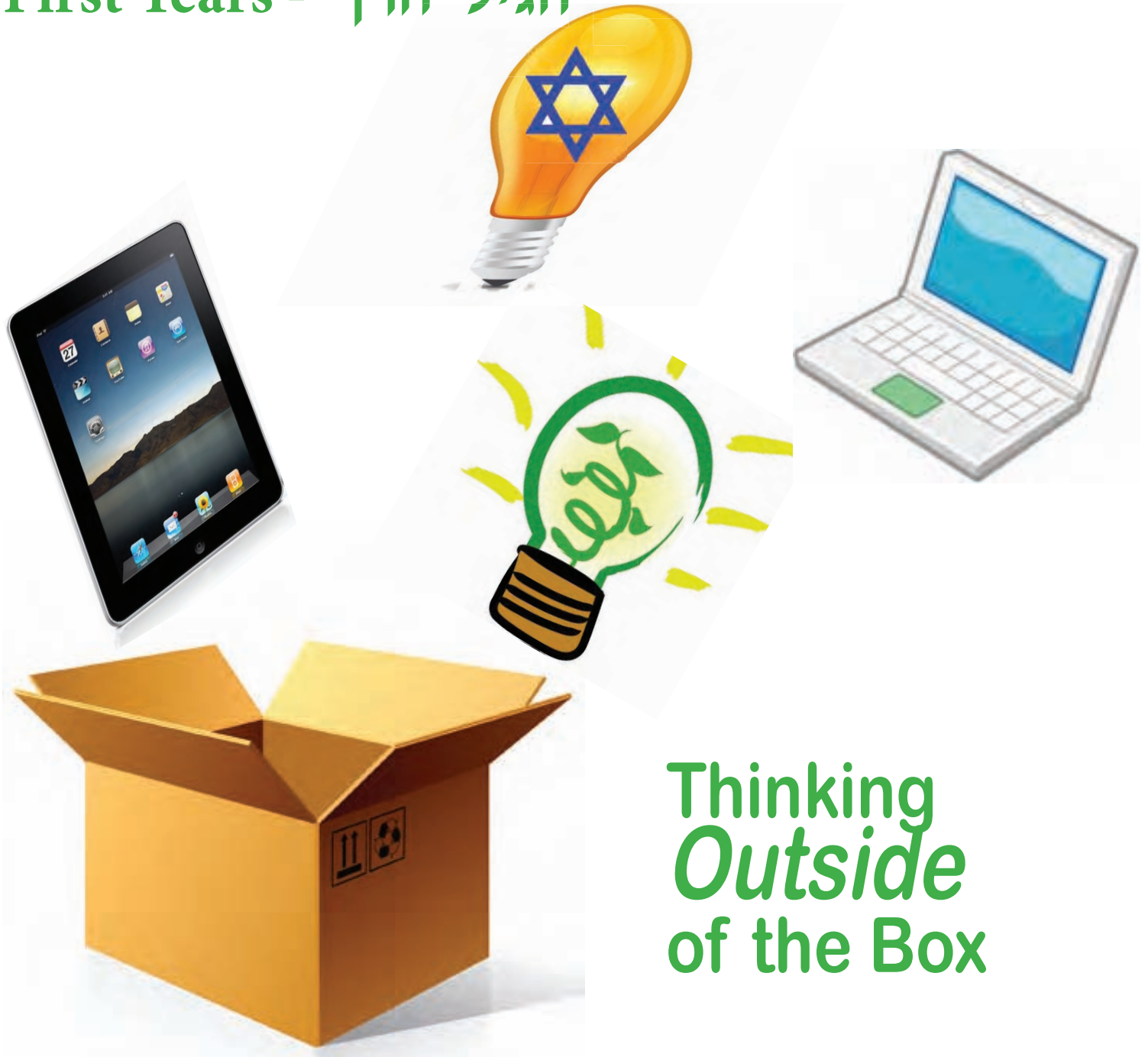


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Thinking  
*Outside*  
of the Box

# Innovations in Early Childhood Jewish Education

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# Mitzvah Lives Within and Without

by Jane S. Shapiro

IT IS IMPORTANT TO BEGIN THIS ESSAY WITH THE DISCLAIMER that I am not an Early Childhood educator. I am, however, a fan of Reggio and Vygotsky,<sup>1</sup> so I sit to write in the hopes of finding acceptance within the EC community because I share the same heroes and try to apply their thinking in my work as an adult educator. Adult learners, which include teachers and parents of young children, also need to make meaning in the company of others and through the use of language. Sitting at a table, trying to make sense of a passage in the *Torah*, often is how we construct that meaning. It is an invitation to imagine, puzzle, and question. It also is one of the ways that Jews can grow close to one another, creating a safe community. In this way, when we look at a Jewish text together and ask the same question that our ancestors asked, we “enter a great Jewish conversation” that is beyond boundaries of space and time.

So it is with the word *mitzvah* and the many sources of Jewish tradition about *mitzvah*. Just to talk about what a *mitzvah* is, to call a particular act a *mitzvah*, and to think about it out loud is to create meaning about the Jewish lives we live today and what we want to transmit to our children. Well, what is a *mitzvah*? Is it just a good deed? Or is it a rule we are commanded to do? How do those two definitions sit side by side and make sense?

Better to construct a definition from our actions and then see where it takes us. Think first of someone you care about, or feel responsible for. How do you show your feelings? If it is a friend who is sick, you might call, visit, or make a pot of soup. If it is a child, you might have a book or a game that you share over and over again. Do you think about greening your classroom and teaching students to recycle to show love for the earth? All of these acts embody the essence of *mitzvah*. They connect us to others with responsibility and love. When we try to do them consistently, taking responsibility for them, we are acting from a sense of obligation. We all know at this deeper level what a *mitzvah* is, even without using the term. But what if we label these actions, which express our inner feelings, with the Hebrew word? Now we have a particularly



Jewish form of self-expression. When I visit the sick, I am performing the *mitzvah* of *Bikur Holim*, mirroring what God does for Abraham in Genesis.<sup>2</sup> When I tend to the planet, I am following God's request that we tend to the earth and protect it, *L'ovdah ul'shomrah*.<sup>3</sup> When we share a song of joy or a story about kindness with children, it is like the *mitzvah* of *tefillah*, music and words that help us transcend our lives and create a Jewish community. Keeping kosher is the language of *mitzvah* that means that food is much more than just an energy bar. It is something special, because it can bring people together for celebration and as a link to the Jewish past.

Think Passover. Because God "speaks" to us in the *Torah* – "And the Lord spoke to Moses saying" – we use the language of *mitzvah* to indicate that when we choose our words wisely and well, and refrain from using them badly, we make choices as holy – *kadosh* – as the *Torah* itself.

Thinking about *mitzvah* in this way can be energizing. Jewish tradition states that "*mitzvah goreret mitzvah*,"<sup>4</sup> that one of these obligated/loving actions often leads us to another. Try

the following exercise to feel its dynamism. Sit in a circle with your faculty, or even a group of children. Pick a *mitzvah*, such as lighting candles or eating *matzah*. Whisper it to the person next to you and ask them to think of another *mitzvah* that seems connected. Candles might lead to *Kiddush*. *Matzah* is linked to holding a *seder* and then to *Maot Hittim*, providing money for the poor so they can purchase Passover food. Going around the circle, the *mitzvah* will morph and change until you return to the beginning of the circle. The connections may be personal. Some may be funny. But within the circle there will be the experience of a Jewish life lived with family, friends, perhaps God, the Jewish past, and, even possibly, the Jewish future, if *matzah* directed you to the *seder* when we open the door for Elijah. The *mitzvah* may have started in your home, but may have taken you to Israel and back again. Like Vygotsky, the game asks you to "think out loud" and make a way of living and thinking obvious and distinctive.

If we, as Jewish educators of all ages, can develop more comfort and awareness of the concept of *mitzvah* and how we are already living it, then what might it mean for our students, their families, and their communities? Vygotsky called it semiotics, a two-part type of language that is both social and inner speech. We can call it what is heard and attended to – "*Shema Yisrael*" and "*naaseh venishma*"<sup>5</sup> -- the forms of thought that link us to our tradition and to each other "*b'ahavah*," with love.

#### ENDNOTES:

1. Vygotsky
2. Genesis, 17:26 – 18:1
3. Genesis 2:15
4. Pirkei Avot 4:2
5. Leviticus 24:7

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