

Teaching Jewish Holidays in Early Childhood Education in Israel Critical Feminist Pedagogy Perspective

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Abstract

Teaching Jewish holidays in secular kindergartens in Israel is a major part of the early childhood education curriculum and often revolves around myths of heroism. The telling of these stories frequently evokes strong nationalist feelings of identification with fighting as they describe survival wars and conflicts in which the heroes are mostly male fighters and Jewish victory over the enemy is celebrated. Thus the teaching of the holidays hidden agenda strengthens ceremonial, patriarchal and national ideas. This paper proposes a number of educational alternatives in accordance with critical feminist pedagogy and Jewish values of social justice. The article focuses on three major holidays: Hanukah, Purim and Passover. It shows in each one of them the conventional reading of the holiday which is the traditional way it is being taught in secular kindergartens, the holiday through a critical feminist pedagogy lens and application in early childhood classrooms.

Introduction

Early childhood teachers in Israel begin to teach a rich program in advance of each Jewish holiday with variety of repetitive activities such as storytelling, drama, and creative play. They also offer a mainstream explanation of the holiday, which lacks any critical perspective or adaptation to the modern context. Although teachers' colleges require a high level in-depth course discussing the holidays, which may be critical, it does not connect with the practice in the early childhood classes and does not suggest any alternatives.

During the many years of preparing early childhood teachers, I have been

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increasingly concerned with the messages that the teaching of the holidays transmits to young children. As a critical feminist pedagogue, I see a need to challenge the hegemonic ideas regarding the woman's place in society, social justice, wars and violence as a way to solve conflicts that are conveyed through the teaching of holidays. I see a great need for a critical reading of texts connected to the holidays, analysis of the existing practices and search for alternatives.

This article describes the ways Jewish holidays are taught in Israeli secular preschools and kindergartens through the perspective of critical feminist pedagogy. It focuses on how current teaching practices promote a mind-set that feeds on concepts of intolerance and enmity towards otherness. This article in contrast suggests educational alternatives based on critical feminist pedagogy and Jewish values of social justice that should be offered as a way of preparing early childhood educators for teaching Jewish holidays, emphasizing social equality and peace education. This article demonstrates how teaching Jewish holidays through the lens of critical feminist pedagogy could offer meaningful options that are both fitting in our times and to the formation of a world view based on human rights and Jewish human values.

Principles of Critical Feminist Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy represents a school of thought that focuses on the way capitalist society stratifies children into the social classes, which they were born by means of education. Critical pedagogy also examines the power relationships between different groups in society and how a school's knowledge conveyed through educational programs reinforces it rather than creating a more egalitarian opportunity for learning. Critical pedagogy investigates the ways which knowledge is induced and constructs human consciousness through education. By highlighting the effect of knowledge, critical pedagogy shows the pedagogical means to affect political awareness, and accordingly change and educate students towards critical reading of the world, using creative thinking to propel them towards equality and justice for all (Shor, 1992).

Feminist critical pedagogy more specifically highlights the construction of gender inequality in a patriarchal society through education. Feminist pedagogy views gender issues as dominating factors that create inequality between people (Gore, 1992). Conventional education tracks girls to lower positions through both hidden and overt messages embedded in the curriculum through constructed knowledge and educational practices (Middleton, 1992).

Critical pedagogy overlaps feminist pedagogy by aiming to expose the mechanism that tracks children to the margins of society, striving to give a voice to disempowered groups, raise societal awareness, initiate social change and promote equality to all segments of society through education. Critical feminist pedagogy provides a lens to view society and education, and interpret and act to humanize them (Gor, 2013). Moreover, it promulgates that educational philosophy and its praxis are inseparable in education (Freire, 1971).

Rethinking Teaching Jewish Holidays with the Lens of Critical Pedagogy

Jewish holidays are celebrated in all preschools and kindergarten in Israel with the exception of Arab educational programs. These celebrations constitute a major part of the early childhood curriculum. Two or three weeks before each holiday are dedicated to various related activities. Some holidays (Hanukkah, Purim, Passover, Independence Day, and Lag Baomer) tell stories of survival, wars and conflicts, in which we commemorate victory over an enemy and we crown male fighters as heroes. Jewish secular early childhood teachings of these holidays emphasize themes of heroism and bravery demonstrated in wars while often neglecting other values that the holidays include. This way of narrating the holidays typically portrays women as less important or absent from shared celebration.

Hanukkah—Conventional Reading of the Story

Before Hanukkah, which is celebrated in December, I asked my student teachers what they knew about Hanukkah, mainly whether they knew about the celebration and origin. The answers I received were representative of how Hanukkah is traditionally taught in the secular education. By and large they reported a diluted story of the Zionist version of the holiday; a story of national war against the Greeks, (a foreign occupier of the land of Israel) where Jews were the victims who fought back and outsmarted the enemy. They told the story of the oil jug that lit the *menorah* in the depleted Temple; often confusing the Greeks with the Romans. The most common response and of greatest importance according to the, was Israeli victory over the Greeks. This, for them, was both the highlight of the story and the cause of the celebration. They listed motives of courageous fighting of the “few against the many,” and “the weak against the mighty” as a basic recurrent narrative of David and Goliath. Students from religious backgrounds also evoked the religious oppression under the Greek occupation and the story of Hanna who sacrificed her sons and kept her devotion to God. They remember the festival of lights, donuts, dreidels, Hanukkah *gelt* and songs such as *Banu Hoshech legares* (*We came to chase away darkness*).

My students received an assignment to observe how their trainer-teacher narrated the story and to report on it. They were then to provide a detailed account of what they experienced in our class: There were children’s coloured paper shaped as menorahs, dreidels and jugs, prepared latkes and an Hanukah festive atmosphere.

The students described the way in which for many kindergartens the narrative of war becomes a fun game for the children, who play with swords and shields made from cardboard, decorated with a *Magen David* (the Star of David). The students informed us of the majority male attraction to war games—with boys being more likely to enact violent games that are otherwise forbidden in early childhood classes. Female students, however, were more likely to create a social, dramatic play using donuts and latkes.

The students listen to their kindergarten teachers who narrate the Hanukkah legend as a war between the “good guys” and the “bad guys.” The protagonists were the Hashmonaim, the Jews who preserved Jewish traditions, and the antagonists were the Hellenized Jews or Mityavanim, the Jews who were influenced by Greek culture. The story is told in black and white, with no complexity, general political background or circumstances.

Retelling Hanukkah’s Story with Critical Pedagogy Lens

There are various sources of the holiday which give different perspectives regarding the development of the holiday, in various periods of history. I will begin with the Talmudic text explaining Hanukkah as a festival of light¹:

Adam, the first, when he saw that each day of the week became shortened, cried:
Woe is to me, the world becomes dark to me because of my sin, and it seems to be returned to chaos and ruin. And this is my death which was decreed by heaven.
He arose and fasted and prayed eight days.

From this passage one may conclude that Hanukkah has a pagan origin which stems from Adam’s (man’s) fear of the shortening days and the prolongation of the nights in December. Unable to explain these natural phenomena, early humans conceived darkness as a punishment for their sins, and prayed for eight days to appease the gods. Today we continue to celebrate the return of light and hope.

Bringing this Talmudic source to the forefront enables us to position Hanukkah, as a commonly shared holiday that appears in various forms in other cultures and nations. This gives us the opportunity to discuss multiculturalism, viewing Judaism as a subculture, which is different from but equal to, rather than superior to, others. In my teaching, I show a colorful PowerPoint presentation of other light festivals which include Christmas, Diwali (in India), Loi Krathong (in Thailand), St. Lucia (in Sweden) and the Lantern festival in China. This exercise helps to include any Arab students in class, as I can ask them about Christmas or the meaning of the Islamic *Fanus* during the Ramadan.

The acceptance of different cultures and acknowledging the different ways of experiencing the world represents one of the ideas of critical feminist pedagogy (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). Multiculturalism promotes understanding of differences, legitimizing diversity as a societal strength. Often I would teach about Christmas even if there were no Christian students in class, so as to lay the groundwork for acceptance of children with diverse background in the future

After asserting the period of the historical events of Hanukkah and the major players as the Hellenized Greeks (*Yevanim*) (not the Romans) I asked the students what they knew about Greece and Greek culture. This question confused many of the students as they did not immediately associate the Greeks of the Hanukkah’s narrative with the Greeks whom they study about in the fifth grade, under the topic of “Greece—The Cradle of Culture.”

The Hanukkah narrative, as told in kindergarten, demonizes the Greeks as a cruel, oppressive enemy; while the historical theme of “The Cradle of Culture” teaches in a nonbiased way about the Greeks who wrote literature and philosophy and created democracy. The students often fail to realize that the Greeks of Hanukah are the same people coming from the ‘grand’ Greek culture. This failed connection is often the result of the stark contrast in the teaching of world history versus that of Jewish history in our education system.

When discussing with the students what they knew about the achievements of ancient Greek culture, most spoke about democracy, Olympics games, sculpture, architecture, philosophy, gymnasium, and mathematics. They named famous philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, Sophocles, Pythagoras. They mentioned great epos like the *Odyssey*. We talked about Greek words embedded in the Hebrew language and about Greek heroes and mythology. We also talked about the limitation of Greek democracy, which did not include women, slaves and plebs as full humans and prohibited them from voting or having any rights.

We collectively attempted to connect our knowledge about Greek culture to the Hanukkah narrative and the possibility of breaking away from dichotomy between the two ethos. Talking about the innovative culture of the Greek Empire created a more sophisticated comprehension of the story of Hannukka. Rereading history and world experience in critical feminist pedagogy aims to connect between the departmentalized knowledge the students acquire and humanize the “other.” I conducted the lesson in a dialogical way that included the students’ knowledge and respect for it. At the same time, I strived to enable them to see new perspectives and observe what they know from another angle that adds new meanings and new dimensions to the story.

The narrative told in schools portrays the Jews who were influenced by the Greek culture in a negative way, naming them “Hellenized” (*Mityavnim*) which carries the connotation of being a traitor or betraying the Jewish tradition. I attempted to provoke the students with applying these concepts to our contemporary scene by asking questions such as: Are we Hellenized? Americanized? Or Westernized? Is it bad? What are the advantages and disadvantages? We look for contemporary parallels such as Jewish groups who oppose new technology and secular knowledge and those who do not have TV internet or electronic games at home. We talk about the tensions between preserving one’s own identity and tradition while opening up to other cultures, for example, what we choose to adopt and what to reject and how such dilemmas manifest themselves in other cultures with which we are familiar.

While implementing critical feminist pedagogy, I use the means of juxtaposition to question and doubt constructed knowledge (Bahruth & Steiner, 2000). Actualization of ancient history and examination in light of today’s knowledge and values illuminates Hanukkah and our teaching of the holiday with complexity. We investigated the economic and cultural relationships of the story’s protagonists and related it to the role of power and powerlessness, of ruling and being ruled, and of

dominating and being in dominated communities. A central question was who was in the periphery, left outside of spheres of power at that time, and who was in power. In contemplating the similarity of our present situation particularly in relations concerning centre/periphery, rich/poor, men/women in a democratic society; we were able to compare this to the Jewish priestly rule under the Hellenist occupation.

Political and economic power struggles have characterized many major events in history. In the case of the Hanukkah story, the ruling elite conducted fierce battles to gain leadership. Jason, who descended from Cohanim (a priestly family) bought his powerful position from Antiochus. Jason led a Hellenist reform and canceled the previous rights given by the Saluki kingdom to live according to the forefathers' tradition. He introduced Greek reforms and established a gymnasium, high schools for sport and art, and a phabium, para-military sport preparatory schools. Menelaus, the high priest who ruled Judea after him, doubled the amount of money offered by Jason to Antiochus and in return received the reign. Many Jews hated Menelaus; while they objected to Jason's reforms, they despised the corruptive way both Jason and Menelaus gained the rule by depleting the Temple treasury. Jason organized a military attack in order to regain power. It failed when Antiochus came to protect Menelaus and he massacred the rebels. The anger toward Menelaus involved class clashes as he symbolized the exploitation of the ruling elite and abuse of power. For his own ends, he plundered the Temple treasures to which each Jew was coerced to pay half a shekel each year. The Hashmonaim uprising against Menelaus ended in a surprising victory and eventually, they inaugurated the purified and sanctified Temple (Schwartz, 2004).

I asked my students to think about the triumphant elevating spirit of the Hanukkah story's victory and to contemplate also about the pain of loss of young lives. I asked them to visualize the toll of men killed in war, to imagine the grief, the suffering, the agony and destruction of war; and picture what it must have looked like.

The miraculous story of the "oil jug" keeping the menorah of the Temple lit for eight days appeared at a much later time in the Talmud Bavli (Talmud, Shabbat, 21). Spreading the story of the revolt against the Greeks became risky after the occupation of the Roman Empire and the Bar Kochbah uprising (132–136 CE) which ended in a total disaster. Evoking the victory over the Greeks 300 years earlier and celebrating an earlier successful war could encourage another rebellion that might lead to a national catastrophe. Eventually the later version of the oil jug story of Hanukkah served to maintain the spiritual acceptance of the *din malchut*, the authority of the ruler of country wherever Jews lived after the destruction of Judea. This new narrative gave the credit of the victory entirely to the miraculous power of God rather than to human initiative. The *Bar Kokhba* uprising ended in the destruction of the Jewish communities in Judea.

Choosing to tell the spiritual, divinized version as the origin of the holiday of Hanukkah conveys the message that "all is in God's hands." The philosopher Leiboviz claims that the sources of Jewish admiration of military power does not

exist as a value in its own right, that Judaism does not glorify military heroism and fighting but rather admires learning of Torah and observation of *mitzvot*. He claims that Hanukkah became a holiday to celebrate the rescue of the Torah rather than memorializing a military victory (Leibovitz, 1995).

Discussing the development of Hanukkah exposes the students to the transformation of the holiday through different periods of time. It shows them how leaders appropriate knowledge as power through history and how it influences reality. Howard Zinn talks about the many “histories” encompassing the hegemonic story and the ones left unwritten in books but told from different points of view (Zinn, 2011).

The main motif of the historical narrative of the Hashmonaim’s revolt as told by Josephus Flavius in *The Wars of the Jews* (Hebrew, 1961) revolves around resistance to religious coercion and the value of freedom to observe religious practices and beliefs. During the 20th Century, the Zionist movement turned Hanukkah into a national holiday and a celebration of national bravery. Prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, the Zionist institutions decided to emphasize the importance of Hanukkah as a symbol for the new Jewish national revival in its homeland. Identifying with the Maccabeus rebels and their military victory, served to create solidarity and national spirit in fighting the enemies of the newly born state. Thus, the holiday was transformed into a celebration of a national revolt for independence rather than resistance to religious coercion or a celebration of God’s miracle. The Zionist version perceived the celebrated victory over the Greeks as a national triumph gained in war for freedom and independence. It obscured issues of corruption, internal rivalry and conflicts among the Jewish leaders, the exploitation of the poor by the rich, greed and the struggle for power. The Zionist movement played down the motif of the divine miracle, turning it into a symbol that glorifies military combat. Hence, fighting the Arabs became a replay of the Maccabeus heroism.

A parallel drawn between the Greeks and the British who ruled Palestine served as a historical analogy that connects the contemporary establishment of Israel to the myths of ancient times. Thus, the verse chanted while lightening the Hanukia “*Bayamim hahem bazman haze*” renewed its meaning in reference to the Arab Israeli conflict. Aharon Ze’ev’s song, “*We carry torches*” (*Anu nNoseem Lapidim*) expresses well the Zionist interpretation of the holiday. The Hanukkah song, “*Nes lo kara lanu pach shemen lo mazano*” (*We did not have a miracle, we did not find an oil jug*), expresses clearly this theme: a celebration of national independence without divine intervention (Ze’ev, 1932).

The use of the Maccabees as a metaphor for the revival of the Jewish people appeared earlier before this song. Theodore Herzl’s book, *The State of the Jews*, ends with referring to the new state as the revival of the Maccabees generation (Herzl, 1896).

Therefore, I believe that a wondrous generation of Jews will spring into existence.
The Maccabeans will rise again.

Bialik, the national poet whose poems are taught in all Israeli schools, called upon the Maccabees to assist the people in his famous poem “*Lamitnadvim ba’am.*” In “*Ir ha’hariga*” he mocks the sons of the Maccabees who ran away from the pogrom in Kishinev like mice.

In addition, my own father who fought in the Jewish British Brigade against the Nazis in 1944 wrote about an encounter he had with Jews in Italy on Hanukkah in this spirit. He described how the Jewish soldiers of the British Brigade lit the menorah on spears with a heightened atmosphere towards the national revival and historical connection to the Maccabees.

Application in the Early Childhood Classroom

Presenting to my students different narratives of Hanukkah allows them to choose what messages they wish to emphasize and convey to the children in teaching the holiday. They need to clarify for themselves their own values, their view of Israeli social reality (past and present) and their philosophy of education. Thus, they may choose the messages they want to convey to the children in an informed way, rather than automatically reteaching the knowledge that they acquired as children.

Knowledge is power (Apple, 2000). Most kindergartens celebrate the Zionist militant version of the holiday lacking awareness of its historical development. Examining the transformation of the holiday’s messages over the years gives us the opportunity to emphasize more democratic values, rather than praise resolutions of conflicts by military force, and give a more complex picture of the historical events.

From the perspective of critical feminist pedagogy, one may use the opportunity that holidays bring to show the complex aspects of war, destruction and human agony. A teacher may choose to emphasize the aspect of religious freedom as part of democratic values or the importance of social equality and economical fairness. War stories foster the mind-set that takes our political situation for granted, as if it is natural to fight wars. Since we do not wish children to conceive of wars as a normative reality, we need to understand how holidays influence people’s mind-set and political consciousness.

Conventional education in Israel forces children learn to view the world diametrically in black and white, good and bad, us and them, men and women; such dichotomies create a distorted undesirable view of reality. Children do not learn to question or cast doubt. Teachers who choose to teach such depictions of Hanukkah should ask who benefits from war: Who loses? Was a war the only option to choose against Menelaus? They may choose to show the Hellenist culture in a more complex way allowing the children to face the dilemma between self-identity and influence of new ideas of foreign culture. A teacher may make connections between the advantages and disadvantages of the Hellenist culture, and juxtapose the dilemmas of the past with similar problems of our present days.

Purim—The Conventional Reading of the Story

As Purim approaches, I ask my students to recall the major protagonists of the story as they remember it and I write the list on the whiteboard. I also ask them to list the common attributes describing each protagonist. The picture usually looks as follows: Vashti—bad, disobedient and impudent; Achshverosh—hedonist and stupid; Mordechai—wise, pious and just, a Zadik; Esther—kind, beautiful and devoted to her people. Haman—wicked and evil.

Their recollections resemble the way teachers in preschools and kindergarten tell the story, in a simplistic, black and white manner. Teachers read the story in a tone that directly influences the children's sense of "right and wrong" without space for any doubt or criticism. The children understand that Haman was bad because he was against us; Mordechai was good because he was one of us; Esther was beautiful and resourceful, and she saved us. Without great effort the children transfer the oversimplified messages to other historical contexts; Haman is also Pharaoh, the Greeks, the Arabs, Hitler and Ahmadinejad.

The teaching and celebration of Purim within Israeli early childhood frameworks often strengthen similar values to those which children have learned about Hanukkah. In both holidays the main characters in the narratives appear in dichotomies of good and bad, us vs. them, and men and women. The messages conveyed in early childhood, Purim's celebrations tend unfortunately to be chauvinist and nationalist.

Twenty five hundred years after the events in Shushan, teachers teach particularistic perspectives of what is good or bad for the Jews as a people, rather than universal narratives that consecrate comprehensive ethics and morals. This leads to superficial conclusions derived by most teachers which delineates what constitutes a 'good Jew,' a 'bad gentile,' a bad woman who refuses to obey men and a good woman who obeys men. Female teachers convey messages oppressive to women and they continue to nurture chauvinist and militaristic values in the young minds. Thus, they transfer to a new generation of children the unjust concepts that they have internalized in their own childhood.

My students have observed kindergartens in which the teacher reenacted a beauty contest where all the boys of the class were role-playing Achashveros, choosing the most beautiful queen amongst the girls who paraded in front of them. They observed the role-playing of the story in which the boy dressed as Achashveros shamefully expelled a girl dressed as Vashti from the palace and chose another girl over her. They also observe the gendered Purim costumes where most of the girls are dressed as queens, princesses, fairies, and the boys are Supermen, Spiderman, Ninja policemen etc.

Retelling of the Story with a Critical Pedagogy Lens

In class, with open Bibles, we critically read together the *Megila*, The Scroll of Esther. We check what the text actually says and we compare it to the way it is narrated in early childhood education. We raise questions and look for other

possible interpretations of the Megillah. We realize that Queen Vashti did not obey the command to appear at the all-male king's banquet because she was busy in her own party at that time. Achashveros wanted to boast of her beauty before his male guests while she refused. Perhaps she was not bad but rather independent, committed to her own guests and pleasures, standing up for her rights, a decisive, rebellious, self-confident woman. For this refusal she was punished and dethroned. Her punishment was intended to teach all women a lesson, not to "*despise their husbands*" (Esther 1:17). Disciplining the queen sent a threat to all women so they would continue to duly serve their men and "*give honor to their husbands*" (Esther 1:20). The obvious moral implication of the story is clear to all: a woman who dares to refuse a man is bad and will be punished. If a woman holds to her own opinions and wishes, she will be expelled from the palace and have no king of her own. We question the relevancy of this message to our time and whether we should continue to uncritically transfer it to young children.

Queen Vashti's expulsion from the palace did not spoil Achashverosh's hedonistic life style. Virgins refilled his harem as ever before. Each maiden had to prepare herself for a whole year for the night she would spend with the king. "*Six months with myrrh oil, and six months with perfume*" (Esther 2:12). The proof of her value took place in the king's bed: "*In the evening she would go, and in the morning she would return*" (Esther 2:14)

Esther was an orphan and her name was Hadassa before her benefactor cousin, Mordechai, altered it to a Persian name to conceal her unfortunate Jewish origin. As a well-educated girl she obeyed her cousin's instructions as she was taken to the king's harem. Mordechai wanted to protect her for he probably understood that her beauty would enhance his interests. She had beautified herself for a whole year for the night with the king and passed the test successfully. The king crowned her. A lesson to all girls: be sweet, beautiful and obedient to succeed in life. A wedding is an accomplishment of a beautiful girl.

The rest of the story is well known: Two guards conspired to murder the king. Mordechai reported them and scored points in the king's memoirs book. However, dear cousin Mordechai, a pious Jew, refused to bow down to Minister Haman because Jewish identity and religious principles were very important to him. As far as his uncle's daughter was concerned, he advised her to conceal her Jewish identity, change her name and get married to a gentile, but he, himself, could not avoid a confrontation with Minister Haman, as he refused to bow to him as was the custom of the time. He could have prevented the persecution of the Jews had he adopted his own advice to his cousin Hadassa by hiding his Judaism and conforming to the Persian norms of conduct.

Haman advised king Achashverosh to persecute all Jews. He had rational reasons to justify it for they served as the ultimate "Others" of that time: "*their laws differ from [those of] every people and they do not keep the king's laws*" (Esther 3:5). It looked reasonable to King Achashverosh. He approved Haman's initiative

and gave Haman the means to execute the decree with a free hand to carry out his plan. He could not think of a more humane solution and hurried to send messengers to legitimize a massacre all over his kingdom. One may realize, then, how the simplistic characterizing of the protagonist does not match the complexity of the text which portrays Achashversosh as not just stupid, nor Haman as the only one responsible for the decree. Additionally, Mordechai appears to be more than just a 'white dove.'

Esther mastered well the court's feminine diplomacy. She learned how to approach the king being aware of the accepted manners, as well as her risks. By the merits of her beauty and feminine wisdom she organized parties (Esther 5:5) and succeeded in reaching the king's heart. She changed the situation drastically and the Jews were saved. She used the limited powers that women had at that time in a resourceful way. Yet, she asked permission for more revenge: killing more people, was that necessary? Was it moral to kill thousands of people? What for?

Reality in Shushan, the capital of Persia, was more complex than the narrative we tell children. Achashverosh was not that stupid as presented in the children's version of the story. He agreed to Haman's idea to kill the Jews understanding the benefits that would increase his treasury or the popularity he would gain (3:9). He authorized Haman to carry out the mission. Eventually Achashverosh should be accountable for this crime, as his unaccountability is greater than Queen Vashti's misbehaviour. By today's standards he could join the list of great tyrants and criminals of mass murder. What is the source of the Jewish tolerance toward him? He turned over the decree (Esther 8:8) and permitted the massacre of "others" instead of the Jews, or is it because he was a family member, belonging to the warm Jewish kinship by marriage to Hadassa? The Jews weren't the real victims of this story. The story is more intricate. After Achashverosh changed the decree against the Jews, they themselves massacred the "Others." *"In Shushan, the capital, the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men"* (Esther 9:12). Esther used beauty and sexuality to save her people. After executing revenge on 500 people, she asked for more: *"And Esther said, 'If it please the king, let tomorrow too be granted to the Jews to do as today's decree, and let them hang Haman's ten sons on the gallows.'" (9:13).* The Jews in Shushan did not celebrate with plastic hammers, costumes and water pistols as Jews do today: *"They slew in Shushan three hundred men, but upon the spoils they did not lay their hands"* (9:15). *"And the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces assembled and protected themselves and had rest from their enemies and slew their foes, seventy-five thousand, but upon the spoil they did not lay their hands"* (9:16). Should we consider the slaughter of seventy five thousand self-defense?

Haman was not the only wicked one in this story. As the minority group, the Jews might have been frightened by the King's decree but they were not *just* victims. In revenge they killed 75,000 people, 800 in Shushan and ten of Haman's children—which they celebrated

When we examine this perspective of the text in class, these accounts surprise my students. They are unfamiliar it because they have never read the whole scroll. Secular schools in Israel rarely teach this part of the story as they try to avoid the moral issues this poses. Interestingly, however, students from religious background are familiar with this ending since they hear the Scroll of Esther read at synagogue every year.

Application in Early Childhood Classroom

My students and I search for alternatives ways of teaching the Purim's story, such as juxtaposing monarchy or any non-democratic rule with a democracy that secures human rights. One may also choose a universal interpretation of the story, rather than a particularistic reading that views only the Jews as victims. We often emphasize how treating women as sexual objects, measured by their beauty and sexuality, violate their human rights. It is also necessary to engage topics of spending public money on extravagant parties and lusty lavish banquets made by the wealthy ruling elite. We could talk about majority - minority relationships and the need to safeguard their rights. We could talk about how fickle a dictator can be and how power corrupts. We may relate to the question of revenge and killing as an illegal means of solving problems at any time. Through the story we may point out that only elected government based upon democratic principles, such as equal rights and equal opportunity for all its citizens, guarantees protection to everyone. Where human rights are maintained, no one, not even the ruler, may conspire against a minority for its national origin, religion or gender. We can explain that in a democratic country everyone is entitled to live with respect, including all minorities, people with different languages, race, culture, nationality or religion, ability or disability. Through the retelling of Purim we may talk about the evil of dictatorships. We may discuss the need for gender equality. We may lay the foundation for understanding of human rights and the obligation of a constitution to protect marginalized people.

Critical feminist pedagogy looks at power relationships. Through the Purim story, we may emphasize gender issues, minority-majority relationships, and awareness of human rights, thus, helping to transform consciousness. We may try to understand the gap between the interpretive way a narrative is told and a text and induce a sense of complex reality, through teaching a pedagogy of questions and dilemmas rather than a pedagogy of dictated answers and preconceived notions.

The following example shows a creative implementation of the principles of critical pedagogy in the teaching of the holidays. Before Purim two of my students dressed up as Queen Vashti and King Achashverosh and organized two parties at different corners of the kindergarten where they taught. They brought costumes, music, decoration and food to create a setting of a grand Persian banquet. The children dressed up, danced and had a lot of fun. At a certain point of the celebration, the student who was acting as King Achashverosh sent one of the children to call the other student who was acting as Queen Vashti. She refused to show up. King

Achashverosh pretended to be offended and demanded obedience. Queen Vashti objected and explained her needs and rights. At that point they started to consult the children asking them to voice their opinions. They left the solution for this conflict of interests open and the children, who already felt involved, argued and debated whether Queen Vashti should obey the king or whether she had a right to decide for herself.

This example demonstrates many options for implementation of critical pedagogy in early childhood. The lesson not only fun but also engaging, age-appropriate, and critically inductive. It left an open question for the children to think about, evaluate and argue. The dilemma with which the children were posed had to do with basic rights of girls and women and gender equality. This was an actualization of the biblical story, made relevant to their own lives and world experience. The children played an active role in the learning process. They were not treated like passive consumers of knowledge, but as critical readers of the world who were able to use their own world knowledge to solve a problem. The teachers (my students) and the children were both simultaneously learners and producers of knowledge (Lee, Menkart, & Okazawa-Rey, 1998).

This exercise demonstrates the creativity that springs from the critical analysis of the text and the empowerment that the students have experienced through critical feminist pedagogy. Raising issues of minority versus majority through the story of Purim might also give children a chance to grapple with issues that are relevant to them and essential to our democratic society. Exposing children to complexity, rather than transferring simplified nationalist, chauvinist messages, helps to foster critical and active thinking in children.

Passover—Conventional Reading of the Story

Early childhood educators narrate the Passover account in a similar way to the Purim and Hanukah stories. This time the “goodies” are the Hebrews and the “baddies” are the Egyptians. Since every child knows that the Egyptians are Arabs they easily connect the story to the contemporary Arab-Jewish conflict. Children at this developmental stage have no concept of historical time. They cannot differentiate well between remote past and present, then and now. Similar to other holidays, Passover conveys a message that we are the victims. Most kindergarten teachers do not tell the story of the midwives, nor do they emphasize the plight of the women who rebelled against the male ruler, the Pharaoh.

Retelling of the Story with Critical Pedagogy Lens

The Israelites immigrated to Egypt at time of famine in the land of Canaan. Hunger drove them to seek a better place to provide for their families. Like many of today’s refugees and migrant workers, they walked through the desert hoping to be treated humanely and find work for their livelihood. They did this for a long time—until a new king came into power. The new Pharaoh violated the basic human

rights of the migrating Israelites by enslaving them. The concepts of human rights or social labour rules and women's equality did not exist at that time. Enslaving a foreigner was common practice. Pharaoh knew that people sought freedom and decent humane conditions, so he feared the Israelite slaves would rebel against him. In order to break their spirit and mind, he initiated a terrible decree to kill all male babies. As a chauvinist, sexist man he feared other males like himself. He could not imagine that women would resist and defy him.

The oppressive system under which the midwives Shiphrah and Puah lived probably included all kinds of violence, both physical and structural.² Being the first refuseniks (conscientious objectors) in Jewish history, Shiphrah and Puah probably weighed and contemplated their decision before acting. They considered the complexity of their lives and the possible consequences of their act of resistance. They struggled with the dilemma and fear in choosing to kill the babies and live with their consciousness or dodge the order and risk their lives and maybe the lives of their family members. They stood in front of the king claiming the groundless argument that the Hebrew women give birth so fast that they failed to help them deliver and therefore could not kill their newborn babies. I try to visualize what was in their minds when they chose to die rather than become murderers of babies. Disobeying the king at that time was an act of heroism that vividly illustrates the limits of obedience.

One may consider the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, as the first Jewish dissidents who refused to follow a blatantly illegal and inhuman order. Yocheved and Miriam who put baby Moses in wicker basket covered with tar and pitch and hid it in the reeds of the River Nile joined the midwives' defiance, as did Pharaoh's daughter. Pharaoh's daughter knew that Moses was a slave's child. She opposed her father, brought Moses into the palace and invited his own mother to nurse him. Parenting this youngster in the palace as the princess' son was a feminine expression of objection to patriarchal domination through daily small acts of resistance. Women of the palace warmed the baby's food, changed his diapers, played with him, and enjoyed his newly developing language.

I imagine how they revealed to him the secret of his origin when he was old enough: how they described to him their refusal to obey the king's order and saved his life, continuing to cherish him, giving him good education and privileged living conditions. Perhaps they sensitized him to the evil of different oppressive manifestations and taught him ethics and morals. Their daily acts of resistance encompassed cooperation between women of high and low classes, a princess and enslaved women infiltrated his consciousness. Together, they challenged the king's authority, crossed all social boundaries of nationality, religion and class to save the life of a small child. It took a lot of courage and an extraordinary alliance between these women from opposite ends of society.

Application in Early Childhood Classroom

The refusal of the midwives to kill the babies born to the Israelites slaves was an act of conscientious objection that should be taught as an example of a moral courageous action. Saving Baby Moses by Yocheved, Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter should be taught with the emphasis on their extraordinary alliance as another example of conscientious objection. Schools and kindergartens should tell this amazing story of women's sisterhood and female bravery. At the Seder, all participants no matter how little or entirely engaged in reading the Hagadah (translate) should praise the women's courage.

It is my recommendation to emphasize the bravery, heroism, as well as the cross-national and class alliance of the women rather than the national divide, the victimization of the slaves and hostility. The story of the courageous Egyptian and Hebrew women who challenged Pharaoh's authority and cooperated together crossed all boundaries of religion, nationality, class and education, is worth telling in every class and in every Seder.

The story of women's resistance is like a pedagogical poem that could serve as a symbol for critical reading of reality, moral judgment and action. We must convey it to our daughters and sons. It should be highlighted in every university and teachers' college. Through the story, we can see what happens when we take a poor slave's child and give him a royal education: he grows to be a national leader and a law-giver. We should endow such good education to all our children—a royal education, regardless of a child's origin, class or gender.

The educational morals that stem out of this wonderful story should be the basis of educational policies. A good 'high-class' education can lay the foundations for egalitarian education for all. The women who defied Pharaoh and objected to his brutal oppression of slaves understood the possibility of a slave's son who has the living conditions and education of a prince could become a prince and leader. They had no stereotypical notions and prejudices regarding differences of nationality, religion, or class. They knew he might reach as high as he wished in society, even leading his people through hardship of the desert into a promised land.

The story teaches that good education, love and alliances across divides may precipitate a revolution. This is a Jewish critical feminist education at its best. Passover is the festival of liberation. Education may liberate people if we strive toward equality and freedom of mind and ideas.

Conclusion

Jewish heritage encourages multifaceted interpretations of its sources. In Judaism one may find contradicting views of peace and war, of mercy and revenge. As educators our pedagogic and curricular choices convey the messages we value for our students. I believe that teaching the holidays in early childhood may generate critical thinking and deep values of peace, tolerance, love and acceptance. Holidays

unite us around ancient traditions and moral standards. Critical feminist pedagogy wrestles with issues of race, class, gender and (dis)ability equality. This article leads the way to illuminate ideas of human rights and gender equality through our holidays through different interpretations and positioning of moral questions for critical examination. The application of critical feminist pedagogy to the Jewish teaching of the holidays in early childhood education complements and reinforces our Jewish tradition of Midrash, exegesis questioning, interpreting and arguing over the meaning of texts. It may also enrich our education and the lives of our young children.

Notes

¹ Tractate Avoda Zara, 8, 71.

² Structural violence refers to a form of violence caused by social order that harm people. Racism, sexism, ageism are some examples for a form of violence that prevents people from having their basic needs and rights met and embedded in our deep social structure. Galtung, Johan. "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research." *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1969), pp. 167-191.

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