

USING MITZVAH MAGIC in Your Classroom

by

Sharon Halper

Imagination will work on what we give it. If Pokemon and Terminator are the only things feeding the imagination, then they will form our dreams, too. But if stories of heroic virtue and of manly, holy deeds feed the imagination, perhaps great feats will ensue and, better yet, great and beautiful people will work on those ideas.

<http://Catholiceducation.org>

WHY USE MITZVAH MAGIC?

Robert Coles, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, has devoted much of his life to the study of children and how they acquire values. In *THE MORAL INTELLIGENCE OF CHILDREN*, Coles' theme is that example is everything in a child's moral formation. He theorizes that moral intelligence is one of three aspects of intelligence, along with cognitive ability and emotional intelligence. It is, according to Coles, the aspect of intelligence to which least attention is paid.

In an interview with David Gergen on PBS (see PBS.org Feb. 21, 1997, BASIC HUMANITY), Coles tells us that 'stories encourage the moral imagination to work, and they are concrete and connected to everyday experience.' Further, Coles says that children need to be members of a moral community in which they can develop character that can sustain them throughout their lives.

MITZVAH MAGIC is about stories! Its use can help provide those role models that we hope all children will have in their lives. Real role models can be emulated; they can set our imaginations in motion and draw us into a world of dreams that can construct our reality.

MITZVAH MAGIC can be about developing a moral community! Its use can help provide those conversations and experiences that make living ethically a reality.

I hope that these ideas, and the ideas they generate for you, will help you do magic with your students and that they, in turn, will do magic in our world!

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WORKING WITH THE TEXTS

Texts are the diary of a people or civilization. They are the headlines that a people uses to tell us about themselves. Each is a statement of the values that the people recognize and by which they aspire to live.

Each chapter of MITZVAH MAGIC begins with a text. Most of the texts come from traditional Jewish sources; a few are of modern origin but clearly compliment the traditional source materials.

Some ideas on using the texts:

At the beginning of the reading:

- Read the text for simple understanding.
What do the words say?
What does the author want use to know?
- How do you feel about the message of the text?
Do you agree with it?
What questions does it raise for you?
Is there something you would change about it?

At the end of the reading:

Return to the text at the start of the chapter.

- How does the text 'fit' the chapter you read?
- Who does the text best 'fit' in that chapter?
- Does the text help your understanding of the chapter?
- Does the text help you to see something that you might have missed?
- How would you express the text in your own words?

SOLVING THE PERSONAL MITZVAH PUZZLE

Finding our own way in the world of Mitzvah-doing is like solving a puzzle. A good vehicle for solving this puzzle is making one!

- Duplicate the following page for each student or make your own puzzle page, using the number of pieces desired.
- At the conclusion of each chapter of MITZVAH MAGIC that you read ask students to respond to one/some of the following questions. Ask students to respond to the question on one of their puzzle pieces.
- At the end of your use of MITZVAH MAGIC ask students to read all of their answers.
- How can their answers help them to decide where they fit in the world of Mitzvah-doers?

The Danny Siegel BIG FOUR:

- What bothers me about the world so much I really need to change it?
- What do I really like to do?
- What am I really good at doing?
- Whom do I know?

Further suggestions:

- What do people need?
- Who can help me find out what is needed?
- What do I/we have that other people could use?
- What can I collect easily from the people I know?
- When can I collect items?
- What event can I/my family/my class 'share' with people in need?
- Where/when do I see a lot of left-over things?
- What storekeepers do I know?
- What storekeepers know me or members of my family?
- What happens to (fill in the blank).....? (Magazines that don't get sold? Toys that are 'out of season' or cosmetically damaged? The items in packaging that is damaged? Samples that companies distribute?)
- What is my dream? How can I use my dream to do Mitzvahs?

The people whose stories are featured in MITZVAH MAGIC are 'ordinary' people possessed of an extraordinary skill. They are able to see the world through the eyes of a Mitzvah-doer. They can see what others need and what they might do about those needs. They wear 'Mitzvah glasses.'

If we clean our lenses we can see through Mitzvah glasses too! Practice helps our vision!

Duplicate the following activity to go with any chapter(s) you select.

WEARING MITZVAH GLASSES

MITZVAH STORY:

MITZVAH HERO:

_____ was able to see that _____

_____ and that he/she could _____

I can see that _____

and that I might be able to _____

Here's a way to start: _____

THE (anything) MITZVAH

Did you ever think that getting a haircut could be a Mitzvah? Planting a garden? Writing a song?

The people whose stories are featured in MITZVAH MAGIC had the ability to create new Mitzvah ideas. They could see the Mitzvah hidden inside an object or the Mitzvah-potential of their actions. Their Mitzvah-thinking ability was in A-one condition. Mitzvah-thinking muscles need development and periodic workout!

To start your own class Mitzvah-thinking exercise program, Contact Naomi Eisenberger, Managing Director of the ZIV Tzedakah Fund (naomike@aol.com, 973 763-9396) for a package of Mitzvah cards. These flashcards contain a single word per card, just waiting to be combined into the next great Mitzvah. They will help you provide a 'warm-up' exercise for your Mitzvah-thinking workout.

As a follow-up ask students to think up the strangest (or shortest or longest or most fun or best-tasting or....) combination they can of any word plus the word 'Mitzvah' and then come up with a do-able project to which their the words lead them. Remember that some of the stories in MITZVAH MAGIC began as 'hair Mitzvah,' 'horse Mitzvah,' 'dog biscuit Mitzvah,' even 'garbage can Mitzvah'!

Create a bulletin board with eye-catching graphics that depict the creative Mitzvot or begin a synagogue newsletter column on creative Mitzvah-thinking as a way of bringing in more thinkers and participants.

MITZVAH MAGIC: writing chapters

There are Mitzvah magicians in our neighborhoods, in our synagogues and in our lives. These Mitzvah-doers can teach us lessons with their stories if we but find them.

Begin a Mitzvah magician collection with a bulletin board or classroom book. Ask students to look for stories of people who do the work of *tikun olam*, healing, in our world. Have them bring in the stories they find and contribute them to the class collection.

Follow-ups to the discovery of articles might include:

- A phone interview with the person.
Class members can contribute to the questions with the student who made the discovery conducting the interview.
- A visit from the person.
The Mitzvah-doer might bring in pictures or other items that could make their Mitzvah come alive in your classroom.
- Support of the Mitzvah by class members.
Is there some way that students might support the efforts of the Mitzvah magician with contributions of goods or Tzedakah money?

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Moral education should be integrated within the curriculum and not take the form of a 'special' program or unit. A program that is simply inserted into the curriculum carries with it an inherent artificiality and discontinuity that renders such interventions incompatible with the more general aims of teachers and students.

Synthesis of Research on Moral Development
Larry Nucci

Educational Leadership, February 1987

<http://tigger.uic.edu/~lnucci/MoralEd/articles/nuccisynthesis.html>

BECOMING MITZVAH MAGICIANS

Mitzvah magicians need a well-rounded education! They need to write letters to companies that can provide goods, to politicians that can help work magic and to people who need to be touched by magic. They need to formulate budgets and to speak to synagogue leaders and to their peers. They need to create publicity and written materials.

Even Mitzvah magicians need to use multiple intelligences to achieve the goal of *tikun olam*. Every student can use his or her skills to do Mitzvah magic and every area of our curriculum can be suffused with the real-world challenge of making magic real in our world.