



Educator's Corner



By Dr. Rachel Lerner

The holiday of Purim is one of the most complex in our Jewish calendar year. On the face of it, we dress in costume and have a big party. The celebration is filled with fun, joy, and connection. Children look forward to Purim for months, planning costumes and preparing to make hamantaschen.

At the same time, Purim is about women's voices and power, sexual exploitation, antisemitism, political corruption, and bloodshed. Both are true: the revelry and the complexity.

While we don't want to lie to children about the underpinnings of the holiday, we also must address the whole of the holiday from a developmental stance. The educational approach of Jerome Bruner's spiral curriculum provides a guide for educators.

The idea behind Bruner's spiral curriculum is that learners of any age are capable of learning anything and he provides the framework to do so. There are three characteristics of the spiral curriculum: 1) a student revisits the same material over the course of their learning, 2) the material is deepened each time, and 3) the material builds upon and is connected to previous learning.

Applied to the holiday of Purim, this means that we don't omit the ugly facts because they are hard to teach, but instead, they are addressed in a way that makes sense to the age we are teaching, knowing that greater depth will be added later in their learning. For example, even our youngest learners can understand the idea that Vashti was asked to do something that she didn't want to do and that she said no. This version doesn't vilify Vashti for not listening and doesn't create a situation in which learning has to be undone. It also brings the conversation into our classrooms about having control over our bodies and getting to say no when we don't want to do something. When this story is revisited with preteens and older children, midrashim can be brought in and deeper reading of the text will open up important conversations around sexual consent and exploitation.

We must be careful not to use the idea of spiral curriculum to avoid issues, but rather to create the groundwork for what will be taught later. A second example of how to approach the holiday developmentally came up last year in our [BA ECE class about teaching kids to say "No" to Haman rather than boo out his name](#). When we take a developmental approach to teaching, we are able to teach ideas in ways that learners of that age can understand.



Dr. Rachel Lerner is the Dean of the School for Jewish Education and Leadership at American Jewish University, where she oversees the MAEd, MAT, MAEd in ECE, and BA in ECE completion programs, training future and current Jewish educators. She is passionate about expanding educators' abilities to include a wider population within Jewish educational settings, making classroom learning a more active experience, and making informal education deep and meaningful.

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