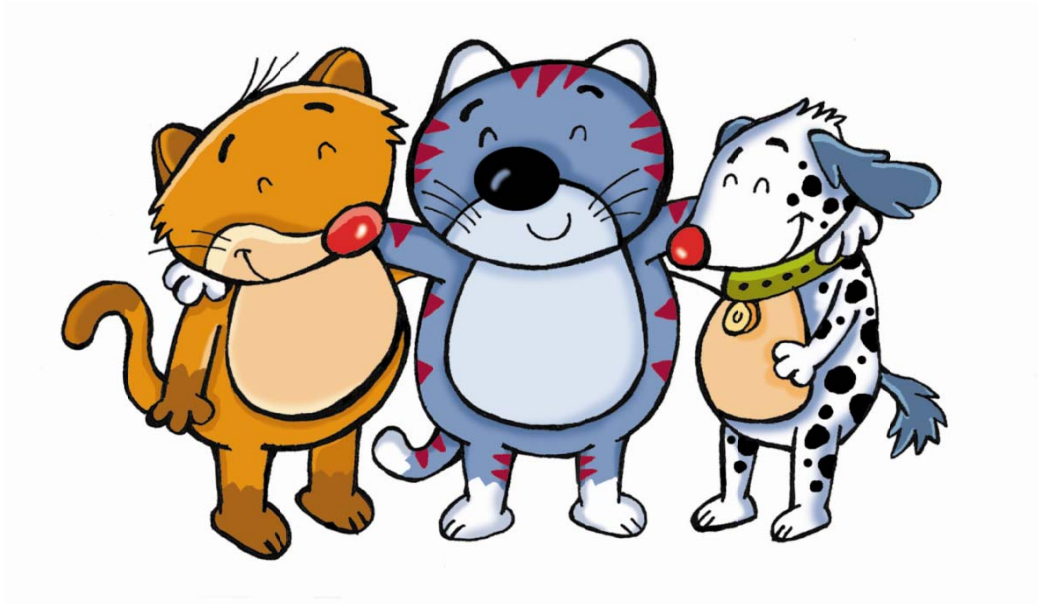


Teaching with **Jewish and Me: Mitzvot**



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Introduction

Mitzvot are commandments given to the Jewish people in the Torah. They include ritual observances, such as lighting candles on Shabbat, blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, and eating matzah on Passover. Mitzvot also include the way we care for ourselves and others, such as by giving tzedakah, treating those around us with kindness and respect, and visiting the sick. *Jewish and Me: Mitzvot*, a set of eight four-page folders for the early childhood classroom, introduces mitzvot to young children and helps them identify ways they can take care of the environment, make a card or gift for someone who doesn't feel well, create *sh'lom bayit*, peace in the home, and more.

Folder 1 of *Jewish and Me: Mitzvot* explains the broad concept of mitzvot. Folders 2 through 8 focus on a specific mitzvah, including taking care of ourselves, tzedakah, and caring for animals. Each folder includes:

- photographs of children engaged in mitzvot, suggesting a multitude of opportunities for experiential learning
- an open-ended question that invites discussion and will inspire children to think about mitzvot in new ways
- the lively *Jewish and Me* cat, first introduced in *Jewish and Me: Holidays*, demonstrating a mitzvah
- a sidebar that introduces simple Hebrew vocabulary
- the Hebrew name of the mitzvah
- a fun "At Home" activity that reinforces the mitzvah
- a "Family Talk" question to encourage family discussion and participation

In this Teaching Guide, you will find an overview of each folder and a host of fun classroom activities incorporating art, music, movement, counting, and sorting. A "Jewish Connections" section for each folder includes additional ideas for relating folder content to Jewish holidays and concepts.

1: Doing Mitzvot

Overview: Mitzvot are more than good deeds. Mitzvot are actions the Torah teaches we *must* do to make the world a better place.

Mitzvah Flags: Cut colored paper into triangles, to be used as flags. Invite children to look at the “At Home” activity on page 4, which encapsulates the mitzvot in folders 2 through 8, and then brainstorm as many mitzvot as they can (*for example, celebrating Jewish holidays or putting money in a tzedakah box*). Let each child decorate a few flags with pictures of mitzvot that he or she has done. String the flags across the classroom. As children do more mitzvot inspired by *Jewish and Me: Mitzvot*, add new flags.

Where’s the Mezuzah? Ask children to find the photo of the boy and his mother hanging a mezuzah (*page 3*). Is there a mezuzah in your classroom? Walk around the building and see how many *mezuzot* children can spot. Inside each mezuzah is a hand-written parchment containing the Sh’ma prayer. Practice singing the Sh’ma with your class.

Our Class Rules: Just as the Torah establishes rules for the Jewish people, encourage children to make rules for the class. These can be modeled on the *Jewish and Me: Mitzvot* folders. For instance, “Taking Care of Myself” encourages hand washing; “Sh’lom Bayit” encourages saying goodbye cheerfully when being dropped off in the morning.

Jewish Connections:

- On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we think about the past year and how we can do better in the coming year. Ask children which mitzvot they would like to start doing in the New Year.
- Teach that Shavuot is the holiday that celebrates the giving of the Torah—and the mitzvot—to the Jewish people.

2: Taking Care of Myself (Sh’mirat Haguf)

Overview: Taking care of our bodies and our minds gives us the strength and energy that we need. This folder reinforces healthy-eating habits, exercise, dressing appropriately for the weather, washing our hands, and getting a good night’s sleep.

Todah Today: Invite children to look at the sidebar on page 3. Fruits and vegetables are part of a healthy diet. Before we eat, we say thank you to God for giving us good food. Teach the blessings for fruits and vegetables:

Baruch Atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech ha’olam, borei p’ri ha’etz.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, who creates the fruit of the tree.

Baruch Atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech ha’olam, borei p’ri ha’adamah.

Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the world, who creates the fruit of the earth.

Shimon Omer: Playing Simon Says (*Shimon omer*) in Hebrew is a great way to help children exercise. For example, you could say, “*Shimon omer*, clap your hands over your head.” Add additional words in Hebrew: head (*rosh*), hands (*yadayim*), feet (*raglayim*), eyes (*einayim*), ears (*oznayim*), nose (*af*), and knees (*birkayim*).

Fruit and Vegetable Alphabet: Ask children if they can find the first three letters of the Hebrew *alef bet* (*they are hanging above the Jewish and Me cat*). Now ask children to think of fruits and vegetables for each letter of the English alphabet. (*A = apple, B = broccoli, and so on.*)

Jewish Connections:

- Ask students if they can find the picture of the shofar (*page 4*), which we blow on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.
- Teach children that on Simḥat Torah, we dance with the Torah. Ask children which parts of the body we might use to celebrate these holidays. (*It takes strong muscles to carry heavy Torah scrolls. We need healthy lungs to blow a shofar.*)

3: Giving Tzedakah (Helping Others)

Overview: Many families do not have enough food or clothing; some children may not have many toys to play with. The Torah teaches that we should share. When we share with needy people, we do not expect to be repaid.

Count Me In: Help children create beautiful tzedakah boxes to bring home. Decorate drink-mix canisters with colored paper, drawings, and stickers, and add a slit on top for inserting money. Alternatively, children might want to make one large tzedakah box for the classroom. Ask parents to regularly send in tzedakah money with their children. Children can count the money as they add it to the box. Each month, the money can be designated for a special charity, including charities in Israel.

We Can Do It: Your school or synagogue may already participate in food, clothing, or toy drives. If so, encourage families to contribute. Otherwise, ask parents to send in canned or packaged food that you can donate to a local food bank. The “At Home” activity on page 4 helps children differentiate between welcome contributions and items that are not appropriate.

Dress My Best: Draw a few life-size figures of adults or children. Ask children to imagine giving clothing to people who do not have enough. Have children work together to “dress” the figures. What kinds of clothing do people need when the weather is warm? What kinds of clothing do people need when the weather is cold?

Jewish Connections:

- How many different tzedakah boxes can children find in this folder? (*three*) Some families put money in the tzedakah box before lighting Shabbat candles on Friday night.

4: Sh'lom Bayit (Peace in the Home)

Overview: When everybody in the family works together, we can fill our homes with shalom—peace and good feelings. Shabbat and Jewish holiday celebrations are special times to build *sh'lom bayit*.

Shabbat Shapes: Ask, “What shape are the candles that we light on Shabbat?” (*round, tall/rectangular*) “What shape is the ḥallah, the special bread we eat on Shabbat?” (*oval or round*) “What shape is the special plate on which we place the ḥallah?” (*round, rectangular, square*) “What shape is the special cover we place over the ḥallah?” (*square or rectangular*)

A Song of Shalom: There are many beautiful Hebrew songs about shalom, peace. Teach your children “Sim Shalom,” “Shabbat Shalom,” or “Shalom Aleichem.” You can find the words and melodies online. Direct children to the sidebar on page 3 and ask them to guess why the Hebrew word for “peace” is also used to say “hello” and “goodbye.”

Make and Share: Make something special in class that children can bring home to be enjoyed by the whole family. Some suggestions: bake small cakes or ḥallahs, make bouquets of paper flowers, or decorate handkerchiefs to make ḥallah covers for Shabbat or matzah covers for Passover.

Jewish Connections:

- Ask, “What are the families celebrating in the cover inset photo and in the middle house in the illustration on page 4? (*Shabbat or a Jewish holiday*)
- Ask children to find the mezuzah on the doorpost of one of the houses on page 4.
- Ask children what holiday the family at the top of page 2 is celebrating. (*Ḥanukkah*) How do they know? (*There is a menorah, or ḥanukkiyah.*)
- Our parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are all part of our family. As Jews, we are part of an even bigger family, *Am Yisrael*, the “Jewish people.” Discuss what it means to be a member of *Am Yisrael*.

5: Being Kind (Derech Eretz)

Overview: Treating everybody around us with kindness and respect—*derech eretz*—is always the right thing to do. This includes being kind to our friends, family, teachers, and other people in our community.

B'ruchim Haba'im (Welcome): Ask children to take turns pretending they are welcoming guests into their homes. How do they welcome their guests? (*Greet the guests at the door, show them where to put their coats, help serve snacks, and so on.*) Direct children to the picture at the bottom of page 2. These girls are making signs to welcome guests on the Sukkot holiday. Invite the religious school director, rabbi, cantor, or students from another class to visit your class. In preparation, have children work in small groups to make welcome signs or placemats for the guests.

You've Got a Friend: In folder 4, children learned the word *shalom*. Direct children to page 3, where they'll find the Hebrew word for friend, *haveir*, or friends, *haveirim*. Put the two words together and teach the song "Shalom Haveirim." Words and music are available online.

Jewish Connections:

- Shabbat and other Jewish holidays are special times for getting together with family and friends. Ask children if they can identify the two Jewish holidays pictured in this folder. (*Hanukkah and Sukkot*)
- Help children name other Jewish holidays where we can practice *derech eretz*—such as Purim, when we share *mishlo'ah manot*, baskets of goodies, with our friends; and Passover, when we welcome guests to our seder.

6: Helping Others Feel Better (Bikur Ḥolim)

Overview: We all know what it's like to feel sick. When family or friends don't feel well, we try to cheer them up and help them feel more comfortable. Sometimes we visit people who are sick. If this is not possible, we can call or send a card or gift to let them know that we're thinking of them, and that we hope they will feel better soon.

Get Well Soon: Invite children to make get-well cards for a local nursing home or children's hospital. Let them brainstorm what kinds of pictures and words they might want to include in their cards.

"Matzah Ball" Toss: Place a large round bin or bucket on the floor at the front of the classroom. Explain that this is a bowl of chicken soup. Blow up some balloons and explain that they're matzah balls. Ask the children to help you label the balloons with words or pictures of things that help them feel better when they're sick (*chicken soup, a good book, a funny joke, a hug, and so on*). Have a balloon toss with children passing balloons to each other, eventually dunking the "matzah balls" in the "soup."

Jewish Connections:

- Chicken soup is a favorite cure-all. Every family has its own special recipe. Invite parents to send in their favorite recipes, including vegetarian ones, then copy them and send home a chicken soup cookbook with students. This activity can be expanded to include favorite Jewish holiday recipes.

7: Caring for Animals (Tza'ar Ba'alei Ḥayim)

Overview: Animals enrich our lives and help keep nature in balance. It is our responsibility to help care for them and be kind to them—whether they are curled up on the floor by our feet, or leaping from branch to branch in the trees in our backyard.

Feed Me: Make bird feeders from milk cartons, following simple directions online. Ask the religious school director for permission to hang the feeders outside the classroom, or send them home with children.

Our Class Is a Zoo! Ask children to draw pictures of favorite pets—real or imagined—and hang them around the room. Invite children to visit the “zoo,” moving from picture to picture, as each child introduces his or her pet to classmates. Children should explain what their pet eats (*pet food, plants, other animals*), where their pet likes to sleep (*on a special pillow, in water if it’s a fish, in a burrow*), and so on. Explain that some animals are active during the day (diurnal), while other animals are active at night (nocturnal). Also, some animals may be more active in warm weather and then hibernate during the cold winter months.

Give Me Shelter: In folder 3, *Giving Tzedakah*, we learned about collecting for people in need. Local animal shelters often welcome donations as well. Organize a collection of canned pet food, towels, or animal toys.

Barking up the Right Tree: Point to the inset photo on the cover, which features a service dog visiting a preschool. Invite a service or therapy dog and its owner to visit your class and explain the special roles these animals play in the lives of people with disabilities.

Jewish Connections:

- On Yom Kippur, we read the story of the prophet Jonah and the whale. Ask your students to imagine what it must have been like for Jonah inside the belly of the great fish.
- Visit a sukkah on Sukkot. Ask your children to imagine a sukkah from the perspective of an animal or insect that lives in the yard. (*What is that large box? How does one get in and out of it? Is there any food inside?*)
- Talk about wildlife in Israel on Tu BiShevat, the birthday of trees, or Yom Ha’atzma’ut, Israel Independence Day.

8: Protecting the Environment (Bal Tashhit)

Overview: Jewish tradition teaches that we are partners in God’s creation: God created the world, and it is our responsibility to take care of it. This folder introduces the term Bal Tashhit, “Do not waste.” Children can help take care of the environment by recycling, cleaning up after themselves, and not wasting water or electricity.

Match the Trash: Play a matching game using drawings or photos clipped from magazines. Include pairs of objects that you would recycle (*vegetable cans, shampoo bottles, milk cartons, newspaper*) and items that cannot be recycled (*sandwiches, fruits and vegetables*). Don’t forget to mention that fruits and vegetables can be composted. If any families compost, invite parents to class to speak about the process.

Branching Out: Ask your religious school director for permission to plant a small garden to beautify your school or synagogue. Alternatively, plant seeds in small containers that you send home with children, or raise money to plant trees in Israel for Tu BiShevat.

Mitzvah Roundup: Point to the newspaper *Daily Mitzvot* in the “At Home” activity on page 4. To review the mitzvot your class learned this year, have children contribute stories and pictures featuring mitzvot they have done or encountered in class and at home. Collect them into a class newspaper called *Daily Mitzvot*. If you

created mitzvah flags throughout the year, have children help make a chart showing which mitzvot they did most frequently, which they liked the best, and so on.

Jewish Connections:

- Discuss how we clean up after ourselves when we have a picnic or eat in the sukkah.
- Passover celebrates the coming of spring. Ask your class to imagine what it was like for the Israelites traveling in the wilderness for forty years. When they moved from one place to another, how did they clean up their campsites?
- Explain to children that on Shavuot, which celebrates the giving of the Torah, we often decorate the synagogue sanctuary with flowers, because our tradition teaches that Mount Sinai was abloom with flowers when the Jewish people received the Torah.