

JEWISH CREATIVE-WRITING ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

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A fun, meaningful way to learn about Judaism is through Jewish creative-writing activities. These can teach or reinforce basic concepts, themes, events, etc., in Jewish civilization, including history, religion, culture, and especially writing, language, books, and anything else having to do with words.

The following list of such activities provides the essence of longer activities I developed while teaching creative writing at the Boulder Jewish Day School starting in about 2008. In the future I hope to provide the longer versions of these activities.

The activities are mostly ones in which young writers will learn about Judaism. They also include ones in which they will learn about different literary forms and techniques in order to make their writing more interesting. Sometimes an activity will be dedicated to one of the latter, without a Jewish connection, but most of the time the Jewish content will be interwoven with the approach, and vice versa. Most of the activities involve writing poetry, but they can be modified as necessary.

Here are a few examples of what I have in mind: In an activity involving the Bible, students might write about the matriarchs and patriarchs, using figures of speech like metaphors and similes. In an activity on rabbinic texts, they might write their own commentaries using the approach of *midrash*. In an activity on medieval Judaism, they might write their own ethical wills and letters. In an activity on Passover, they might write "their own" *Haggadah*. Conversely, in an activity in which students learn about commentary and sermons, they will be asked to write their own. On the other hand, the acrostic activity focuses purely on technique. However, other activities involve an acrostic or suggest their optional use in an assignment.

Teachers can plug the activities into their curriculum or use them as supplemental activities in, say, an after-school or summer camp program. The Topics by Category list aggregates the activities in categories like Bible, Prayer, and Travel.

When I began developing these ideas, I had taught creative writing to children but never Jewish children, and I would say that my knowledge of Jewish subjects was fairly conventional. But, because I have been a poet for a long time, value freeform creativity, and had a school principal who was open to experimentation, I allowed myself to just let go. I tried to connect the activities, where possible, with the Jewish calendar, but sometimes I just found a topic of interest to me and tried it out on the children. I also experimented with the Torah portion, historical periods, language, prayer, food, and other topics.

For example, I had recently learned about magic (incantation) bowls, went to a pottery studio and had bowls made, and brought them to the class, with fantastic results. The bowls activity combined religion with magic with history, and allowed the children to use both their literary and artistic skills. By the way, one of the children, the son of an Orthodox rabbi, was a Harry Potter expert, so when I asked the class to define magic and say how it might or might not fit with Judaism, he was the first to raise his hand.

This experience made me realize that I could rely on the students to fill in the gaps in my own

knowledge and often take the lead. In a session we did on clay tablets, for example, the children, being far more expert at working with clay than I was, took the lead on the best way to do the activity. Speaking of which, the children I worked with ranged in age from five to 12—K to 5—in one classroom.

I have provided a subject index first, followed by the activities organized A-Z. Usually the beginning of an activity is aimed at teachers or parents, and the rest of the activity at students. Some of the ideas have been developed a little more than others. My apologies for the inconsistencies, but at this point I felt it more important to get the activities out there than to spend a lot more time polishing them, which in the past I would have done. Feel free to use these ideas as they are or as inspiration for your own activities. Giving me credit would be greatly appreciated.

Terms that have their own activities, like ACROSTIC, are capitalized when used in other activities, for easy cross-referencing. Hebrew words and a few other special words are *italicized*.

SUBJECT INDEX

Note: Many of the activities can be found in more than one category.

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MATERIALS AND TOOLS

Aside from paper, pens, pencils, and erasers, you may want to make available: colored pencils, pens, and markers; watercolors and brushes; notebooks; magnetic strips; modeling clay and tools that might be good to write on it; paper plates and bowls; and other crafts materials.

THE ACTIVITIES

ACROSTIC

In an acrostic poem the first letter of the first word of each line usually will spell out a word or a name. The Bible contains some acrostics, and these are common in poetry written during the Middle Ages. A name acrostic will identify the author of the poem, and so these were used before printing, when manuscripts were copied by hand, so the acrostic might identify the name of the author. Using acrostics in poems and other writing can be challenging and will make your writing more interesting.

Try writing a short poem with your name, as I have done in the following, which I just made up and isn't very good but will give you the basic idea:

Here I seek you in the
Early morning
Newly opened flowers after the
Rain as blanketed the earth with
Yellow

ADVERTISEMENT

An advertisement, or ad, helps sell something like a food product.

Create a new Jewish food product to fit with a Jewish holiday or for Shabbat or Havdalah. Start with a marketing plan that describes your product, what occasion it is for, who the market is (adults, families, young children, girls, etc.). Think of a name for the product, a design for the package, a slogan to help sell the product, and a logo (a design with the name of the product). Then write a jingle or commercial to sell the product. Here are a few examples of products: Chocolate-covered gefilte fish for Passover. Or how about matzoh smores? Or peanut butter matzo balls? Make sure they are kosher for Passover, of course; I can't say if any of these are.

ALLITERATION

Alliteration is a technique in which you begin words with the same letters, like Awful Andy, Melancholy Moon, Plenty of Powerful People, and Fabulous Fenugreeks. Usually the two words are next to each other, but not always. This technique can be used in any kind of writing but is mostly a feature of poetry.

Make up some of these using two or more words. Then use them in a poem or other piece of writing.

ALPHABET BIBLE

You probably remember alphabet books from your childhood. An insect one might go like this:

A is for ant
B is for bee
C is for caterpillar
D is for doodle bug

Make your own alphabet book using characters in the Bible or Jewish holidays:

A is for Ahasuerus
B is for Benjamin
C is for Cain
D is for David etc.

You may not be able to find a name for each letter, so you may need invent a name. Once you have the basic alphabet of names, add a little something about each person. For example:

B is for Benjamin, who was Isaac and Rebecca's youngest son.
D is for David, who was king of the Jews.

ASSONANCE

This is a technique in which the internal sounds of words rhyme, like Meat and Eat, Run and Fun, the Engineer Steered the Train, and Light My Fire (3 sounds).

Make up some of these yourself and try them in a poem or short piece of prose.

BAD BIBLE JOKES

Jokes are supposed to make you laugh. Some jokes are good ones, some are stupid, some are bad, and some are really bad. A really good bad joke might make you go Aaargh or Oof or make other strange noises or make you throw up your arms or even make you throw up. In the bad-joke world, bad is good.

Make up some bad Bible jokes with a Bible character or story or place—something in the Hebrew Bible. The joke can be short or long but has to be *very* baaaaad. Here are two examples:

Q: Why did Noah build the ark?

A: Because he couldn't swim.

Q: Why did people forget to toast Sarah on her 80th birthday?

A: Because they forgot their glasses.

Now, make up your own jokes that are worse than these two, which now don't seem especially bad.

BIBLE DIALOGUES

The Bible has conversations between characters and also between humans and God.

Make up conversations between two biblical characters. For example, you could have Abraham talk to Moses, Adam to Noah, Sarah to Rachel, Hannah to Abel, and so on. What they say should fit with who they are, with the personalities they have in the Bible., or an insight you have about them When they lived doesn't matter—they could be sisters like Rachel and Leah, or not even related and living hundreds of years apart. This will make it more fun. Have them say things, ask questions, describe what they feel, and so on.

BOOKS

Jews are the "people of the book," referring to the Hebrew Bible. But, books as we know them are relatively recent, and today of course a lot of books are read on electronic devices. Jewish books have evolved over the ages as materials and writing instruments have evolved. (Should Jews now be called "the people of the e-book"?) Take a favorite Bible story or write your own story and "publish" it in one of the different forms books have taken through the ages, for example, using traditional flat pages or scrolls, or even electronically—for example, on your Facebook page if you have one, or in an email.

BURNING BUSH

One of the most famous stories in the Bible describes Moses' vision of the burning bush. Some modern scholars think the bush might actually have been a black raspberry bush.

Whether or not it was, your task is to ask yourself: "What if I saw Moses tending sheep at the edge of the desert when he had a vision of God in the burning bush?" Then, write a poem about what you saw, using colors, feelings/emotions, thought or ideas, one or more birds or other animals besides the sheep

that you saw or heard, one or more things you touched or smelled, one or more things you were stepping, standing, or sitting on, and so on.

Also describe what Moses, the angel, or God looked like or was wearing—clothing, eyes, hair, skin, hat, shoes, etc.

Use at least one rhyme (a rhyme in time is sublime), one alliteration (the first letters are the same, like Egyptian elephant), and one simile (a dog is *like* a friend).

CALLIGRAPHY

Calligraphy is fancy writing, and it is used in Jewish writing. Sometimes the fancy writing could be used just for the first letter of a poem or other piece of writing, other times throughout what is being written. The *ketubah*—the Jewish marriage contract—often is or was done in fancy handwriting.

Use fancy writing in any of the activities in this list or make up your own activity.

CANDLES, SPICE BOXES, PLATES, ETC.

Creating beautiful Jewish ritual objects is a longstanding tradition. Decorate these or other objects with Hebrew letters or words, along with artwork.

CARTOON

A cartoon is usually a simple sketch that often is humorous.

If you are handy at drawing or painting, create a drawing for a cartoon that illustrates a character in the Bible—for example, Rebecca—what you think she might look at. Add a caption using her words or yours. If you are more ambitious, you could create a Bible comic strip illustrating a story or scene, for example, the crossing of the Red Sea. If you search for "Jewish cartoons" on the Internet you will find many examples, in case you need inspiration.

CHANT

A chant is often a short poem or other text repeated over and over, sometimes in sing-song fashion.

Take a prayer or biblical story and condense it into a very short prayer that lends itself to repetition. Try it with a small group of friends or with your whole class, or even in synagogue, in consultation with your rabbi or cantor.

CHARMS, SPELLS, AMULETS, AND MAGIC BOWLS (FOLKLORE)

Charms, magic spells, prayers, and amulets have been part of Jewish culture for at least several thousand years. Many of them offer "protective magic" to protect the wearer from harm, while others are for good luck (like a *chai* necklace), and still others are meant to attract a beloved. These include the *hamsa* (shaped like a human hand), the *SHIVITI* (a charm containing a short biblical verse), and the MAGIC BOWL (pottery bowls with spells, biblical verses, and pictures). The latter two entries contain more information on the subject and also some activities. The entries on PRAYER will also be helpful.

Now write or make something that is "magical" in a good way. Do NOT write anything that might bring harm upon someone or something. For example, "May God help my friend Rachel be healed from her broken leg" is the right idea.

CHILDHOOD OF FAMOUS BIBLE PEOPLE

We don't know a lot about the childhood of our ancestors. We do know that Isaac was going to be sacrificed by his father, Abraham, when he was younger, though we don't know how old he was. We know that Esther, in the Purim story, was probably an orphan and was beautiful, but we don't know a whole lot about what her childhood was like.

Pick someone in the Bible that you like or know a lot about and make up a story about his or her childhood. Use lots of detail. If possible, try to make a connection between the childhood you imagine and the adult you know about from the Bible. For example, it is said that Isaac, because of his traumatic childhood, embodies the quality of *gevurah*, strength—he had to be strong to protect himself because he was afraid other people might take advantage of him.

CLAY TABLETS

At one time people wrote on clay tablets. They scratched words or pictures (as in hieroglyphics—picture writing) on either soft-clay tables (before they were baked) or hard-clay (baked) tablets.

Experiment with this medium by making some clay tables from modeling clay and trying to write Hebrew letters or words or even just English ones, using different writing implements—pens, pencils, nails, the hard part of a feather, sticks, your fingers, etc. Keep a log of your experiments—which type of clay worked best, which instruments, etc.

Next, using modeling clay, make one tablet that looks like one of the biblical stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments and try writing ONE one of the Commandments on it. Take notes on what you learn from your experience.

COLLAGE BOX

An art collage often combines strips of paper, material, or other objects in a design. A collage box is a box that contains a lot of different objects.

Create a collage box (a cigar box if you can find one is a good type of box, or you could use a cookie tin or even just a modified cereal box) that contains Jewish objects. You could make some of the objects from paper or wood. Be sure to include writing as well. For example, you could paint Hebrew letters on colored construction paper, cut them out, and paste them on the box. You also could write prayers on or in the box.

Examples of objects you could use might include a small Israel flag pin, a macaroon, a chai necklace, a mezuzah, a paper collage using pictures from a Jewish newspaper, Hebrew letters, or a CD of Jewish music.

DESCRIPTION

Good writing is often very descriptive, using interesting language. Description can be enhanced using FIGURES OF SPEECH, RHYME, and musical effects like METER. All of these can be used in either poetry or prose or song.

Another way to jazz up writing is with modifiers—adjectives and adverbs. Although some people think too many of these make writing weaker, for the students doing these activities, I think using lots of modifiers should be encouraged.

Write a poem or other type of writing—either one you think of on your own or one that is based on one of the activities given in this list—and after you are done, add some modifiers. For example:

Roses are red, and violets are blue. These are my favorite flowers and colors.
The huge, perfectly shaped roses are a beautifully bright red, and the tiny, pretty violets are pale blue.
These are my very favorite summer flowers and pastel colors.

Whether the changes are for the best is up to you to decide. What do you think?

DREAMS

Dreams are an important part of the Hebrew Bible and also of other Jewish texts, like the mystical *Zohar*, the *Book of Splendor*. You probably are familiar with Jacob's dreams in the Bible—in one of them he sees angels going up a ladder, then down. In another, he wrestles an angel. Joseph, one of Jacob's sons, famously interprets a dream had by Pharaoh.

Find some other dreams in the Bible and make a list of them. Also, for a week, keep track of your own dreams in a diary you keep by your bed. You need to write down dreams as soon as you wake up, or else, as you know, you usually will quickly forget them. If you have any really interesting dreams, write them down in great detail. See if you can find some special meaning in the dreams. Do you have any dreams like Jacob's, which involve angels? Try interpreting your dreams, the way Joseph did.

ETHICAL WILLS AND LETTERS

Ethical wills and letters are documents typically written by parents to children in which the parents describe the values, beliefs, and requests they would like their children to carry on after the deaths of the parents. An ethical will leaves values and wishes but not money or property, as a legal will does. The first Jewish ethical will, though not called an ethical will, probably occurs in the Bible when Jacob blesses his children before he dies.

Write a letter or ethical will expressing your personal beliefs to a friend, brother or sister, parent, or other relative. A sample beginning for such a document might be: "I value friendship above all else and hope you do too."

FABULOUS FENUGREEKS (and other ominous foods)

An omen is a sign predicting that something might happen. "Ominous" is the adjective form of the word. If you say "the dark clouds look ominous," you might mean that a storm is on the way.

According to the Talmud, certain foods reminds us of good things and thus are good to eat during Rosh Hashanah. These foods include fenugreek, a member of the pea family that can be eaten as food but usually is used as a seasoning. Why fenugreek: "Fenugreek" in Aramaic is *rubia*, which sounds like *yirbu*, meaning "to increase." So: "May your joy increase this year."

Did you ever eat fenugreek or other omen foods on Rosh Hashanah?

Write a prayer for the Jewish New Year that contains the name of a fruit or vegetable and also is fun. For example: "May it be your will, our God, God of our ancestors, that the New Year be as sweet as a juicy, crunchy, beautiful, ripe red apple dipped in honey." You can use wordplay, too, for example: "Olive—I pray that we *all live* in harmony." If you know Hebrew or Aramaic or Spanish or another

language, feel free to use a foreign word.

Here are some more fruits and vegetables to get you started, or you can think of your own: squash, corn, lettuce, mango, peas, plum, rose, turnip, corn, prune, grape.

You also could create an omen plate, like a *seder* plate. Put several fruits or vegetables on a plate or, if you don't have any fruits or vegetables, draw some on a paper plate. Decorate the plate with designs. Write your prayers on the paper plate.

Another idea is to write a very short prayer and put it in a fortune cookie. If you can use an existing fortune cookie, good luck! If not, you will need to figure out how to make a fortune cookie. It's not that difficult, but you will need a recipe and, depending on your age, maybe some help from an adult.

FIGURES OF SPEECH

A figures of speech are phrases that go beyond the obvious meaning of the words. These are very important in poetry, in particular, which finds unusual and interesting ways to say things.

The most common figures of speech are metaphors and similes. A metaphor equates two things. For example: Her eyes were shiny moons. A simile is similar but usually uses the word like: For example: Her eyes were like shiny moons.

Practice writing some of these and then try using them in a poem or other piece of writing. You could take something you already have written and decorate it with some figures of speech. A good simile will make a poem shine like the sun, and a good metaphor will turn a poem into a thousand suns.

FOODS OF THE WORLD

Pick a country or different part of the US from where you live and find out what Jews eat and drink (or ate or drank in the past) on a daily basis, on Shabbat, on holidays, and at special occasions like a *bat/bar mitzvah* or wedding. Make a list of these foods and beverages. Then see if you can find any of them in a market. If you can't find any, find some recipes online or in a book and, depending on your age, see if you can make one of the foods or beverages you find.

For example, let's say you find that Polish Jews eat or ate a lot of special pancakes on Shabbat. Unless you live in a city like Chicago that has a large Polish population, you probably won't be able to find these pancakes in a store or restaurant, so you would need to find a recipe and try making them yourself or with help from your parents.

FOOD DIARY

Start a daily diary in which you describe any "Jewish" foods or beverages you eat or drink. For example, maybe on Monday you eat a pastrami sandwich and on Friday you drink Kosher grape juice for Shabbat.

GENEALOGY

Genealogy is the study of family lineages; knowing our own genealogy helps us to know ourselves, to have a sense of who we are. Knowing where we came from and to whom we are related is important to everyone and especially to Jews. The Bible includes such lineages, as does the Talmudic tractate *Pirkei Avot*—the *Ethics of the Ancestors*.

Create a family tree for your own family or for a biblical family like that comprising Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, etc.

GENIZAH I

A *genizah* is a storeroom in a synagogue or other place in which used, old, or worn-out religious books, and documents like letters that contain the name of God, are stored. A lot of the materials found in a *genizah* are in bad shape—falling apart or crumbling—so that it is difficult to know what the original text was or said. The most famous *genizah* was found in an old synagogue in Cairo, Egypt.

Build your own *genizah* to store discarded Jewish books. You might want to do this in your classroom at your Jewish school, at your local JCC, or in your synagogue—with permission from the principal, teach, or rabbi, of course.

GENIZAH II

Now take some old magazines or newspapers or letters, tear or cut them into pieces, mix up the pieces, and try to reassemble them, as if you were assembling a puzzle. The process of fitting pieces of old books and documents together is what scholars use when working with *genizah* materials they find. Scholars are still working on the more than 200,000 pieces of writing found in the original Cairo *genizah* and now stored in various collections around the world, including the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City.

GROUP POEMS

Write group poems with one or more other students as a collaborative project. One approach might be for one student to write a line, pass it along to another student, who adds another line, and so on.

HAGGAGAH

The *Haggadah* is the telling of the Passover story, from the Hebrew word *aggadah*, which are the nonlegal portions of the Talmud, the most important collection of discussions, legal opinions, and sayings of the early rabbis. Often these portions are stories or legends or parables.

Using the traditional *Haggadah* and words of your own, make your *Haggadah*, with illustrations.

HANDMADE BOOKS AND OTHER WRITING

Before the invention of the printing press, in the fifteenth century, books were either printed using woodblocks or written by hand on materials such as parchment, papyrus, clay, and stone. Imagine how difficult it would be to make a book from stones. Think of the Ten Commandments, which were engraved in stone. Only after people began using some of these other materials could the Commandments be collected in one place and read by many people.

Make your own Jewish book. It could take the form of a regular book or a scroll. It needn't be long—even one sheet of paper folded in half could be considered a book.

HAVDALAH AND SPICES

Havdalah is the ritual done after the end of Shabbat. Part of the ritual involves passing around and smelling a small container of spices to remember the sweetness of Shabbat and to keep us alert for the coming week. Sometimes these spices might just be cloves, sometimes a mixture of spices like cloves, cinnamon, and dried ginger.

Experiment with different spices and make your own Havdalah blend.

Make your own Havdalah box or cloth container to contain the spices.

HELLO

It is said that the famous Talmudic sage Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai was always the first to greet people he met on the street, whether or not they were Jewish.

Imagine yourself traveling to another country whose language is not English and being the first to greet whoever you meet by saying "hello" (or good day, good morning, good evening, etc.) in the local language. For example, in Israel it would be "Shalom," in Italy "Ciao," while in India it might be "Namaste."

Make a list of countries and compile an A-Z of greetings; the Internet is probably a good place to find this information. After you do that, imagine yourself a time traveler going back in time and do the same thing for countries or regions like ancient Israel, Babylonia, Egypt, Rome, Greece, and Mexico.

HOLIDAY JUMBLES

Pick a holiday or other Jewish occasion like Shabbat. Make a list of words that can be created from the letters in the holiday or occasion. Here's a starter example:

Shabbat

a

ah

at

bah

bat

sat

Now, write a poem using the original word and the words you have made from the original word. The poem should tie in with the holiday or occasion. For example, the poem using Shabbat and Shabbat words should have something to do with Shabbat. You also could be fancy and do the poem as an ACROSTIC with the first letters of the first word in each line spelling Shabbat. In your poem also try to incorporate figures of speech, rhymes, and colorful language. You also might want to write the poem by hand using fancy writing—calligraphy.

ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS

An illuminated manuscript combines words with drawings. Sometimes the drawing might just be a fancy first letter of a word, while other times a story might be illustrated with many drawings.

Make your own illuminated manuscript with ornamental letters, pictures, etc.

INCENSE

Burning incense was an important part of the religious service done when there was a Temple in Jerusalem. The Talmud—the compendium of legal and other discussions and stories of the early rabbis—describes the recipe for the incense burned in the Temple.

Find this recipe—Orthodox prayer books will have it in one of the morning prayers—and see if you can locate the ingredients in your home or in a market. Once you have the ingredients, see if you can re-create the blend used in the Temple. If you cannot find all the ingredients locally, try online to see what you can find. You probably will have trouble identifying some of the ingredients, because they have unusual names, so be prepared to be frustrated in your search.

Under supervision of an adult, burn some of the incense to see what it smells like. Alternatively, use the blend for Havdalah.

ISRAEL TRAVEL BROCHURE

A travel brochure contains words and pictures describing a country or city or place visited by tourists from other places.

You will be doing several writing activities about Israel that you will then assemble into a little brochure. If you are a teacher, you might print these activities, make copies, and divided them up among several groups of students.

1. Write an ACROSTIC poem using the name Israel and that says something about Israel. If you know about Israel without doing research, you are ahead of the game. Otherwise, go to the Internet or find a book or books with information.

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2. Write an ad telling people why they should visit Israel. Give lots of specific reasons.

3. Write a poem or song or other type of writing that describes Israeli foods in a mouth-watering way.

4. Describe, using lots of colorful language, an Israeli city, historic site, museum, kibbutz, religious site, or other tourist attraction. If you have been to Israel and remember enough to use the information, go for it. If not, you will need to do some reading.

5. Describe in great detail a natural place in Israel: a park, the desert, the Dead Sea, the Mediterranean Sea, mountains, a beach, or a similar type of place. Do the same for the animals, birds, insects, fish, plants, etc., you might see there.

6. Describe some of the people you might meet in Israel. Who are they? Where are they from? What language or languages do they speak? What do they look like? What do they wear? Are they all Jewish?

7. Write a haiku about how wonderful Israel is. A haiku is a Japanese poetic form with three lines—line 1 has 5 syllables, line 2 has 7, and line 3 has 5 syllables.

JEWISH TRAVEL PROJECT

Jews have lived in different countries throughout history. Jews have continuously lived in some of these countries for a very long time, and in others for a very short time. Jews lived in still other countries for a long time and then all left.

This project involves writing about one country that has or has had a Jewish population at some point in its history. Unless you are from one such country and know a lot about the country, you will need to do some research on the Internet or in books. One of these countries is a good place to start: Argentina, Australia, India, Italy, Morocco, South Africa, and Spain. If you prefer a different country, go for it!

You write up what you find, and add visuals—for example, pictures from the travel section of a newspaper or from a travel magazine you can cut up. In your writeup try to include as much of the follow as possible:

For each country:

1. Find five animals that live there and draw a picture or find one.
2. Find seven words in the language that Jews would use.
3. Find a design or piece of Jewish art that has something to do with your country. For example, it might be a Star of David with a kangaroo in the middle.
4. List four questions you want to ask Jews you meet in your country.

Now, here are some questions specific to each country. Try to answer the ones about your country:

1. Argentina: Are there or were there Jewish cowboys in Argentina? Did or do Jews have anything to do with the tango dance?
2. Australia: Do Australian Jews surf? Do they ever use traditional Australian aborigine designs on their *kippah* or *tallit*?
3. India: Do or did Indian Jews eat curries? Do Indian Jewish women wear saris?
4. Italy: Italy is famous for its opera. Have there been any famous Italian or Italian-American opera singers? Do Italian Jews eat pizza?
5. Morocco: What foods do or did Moroccan Jews eat? Why don't Moroccan Jews invite strangers to their seders?
6. South Africa: Since South Africa is far south, do South African Jews celebrate Jewish holidays at a different time of the year from when we celebrate? For example, Purim is usually a Spring holiday, but in South Africa Spring will be in the fall. Next questions: Do South African Jews eat any special African foods?
7. Spain: What language do Jews living in Spain today speak? What did they speak in the fifteenth century? What does Sefardic (or Sephardic) mean?

LAG B'OMER

The holiday of Lag b'Omer, which is celebrated 18 Iyar, partway between Passover and Shavuot, commemorates the death of the Talmudic sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (also written Simeon ben Yochai) Religious Jews today celebrate with barbecues and bonfires.

Do some reading about the rabbi and then imagine you are him going to heaven. Describe your experience in the first person in what is called a testament: "I, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a Talmudic sage of the second century . . ." Use lots of detail.

LEGAL CODES

Jews have compiled legal—or law—codes over the years. Sometimes the laws are brief, while other times they include the various opinions about the laws.

Compile your own code of Jewish law. If you have a hard time, take a look at some of the famous codes, like the *Shulchan Aruch* or Rabbi Moses Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*. If you are familiar with the *Mishnah*, search it for some legal rulings. If you still strike out, make up your own legal code containing rules you think your friends should follow.

LETTERS

Jews have written letters for hundreds of years. Some are personal, to friends or family, while others are directed to rabbis, community leaders, rulers, or other people in power.

Write a letter to someone in the latter category in which you express something very important to you.

LIMERICKS

Though not an especially Jewish form of writing, limericks can be a fun form to use in Jewish creative writing. A limerick usually has five lines; the first two lines rhyme, and the last line has the same rhyme; the third and fourth lines have their own rhyme. Sometimes all the lines have the same rhyme. The rhymes do not have to be exact, just close enough. Here's an example you probably already know:

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet,
Eating her curds and whey;
Along came a spider,
Who sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffet away.

LITURGICAL POEMS

Jewish prayerbooks usually contain special poems, called liturgical poems (liturgy = prayers), composed to fit with specific prayers in the liturgy. These poems might build on the prayers. For example, you probably know the traditional prayer song "Mi Chamocha." Poets have written poems that expand on this prayer song that usually are meant to be part of the prayer service. Poems also can be meant to fit with the prayers and to be read outside the prayer service.

Find a prayer you like and write a poem that fits with the prayer. Remember to use figures of speech, maybe rhyme, colorful language, images, maybe meter, and other features of poetry. You also could try an ACROSTIC. Since poems were written by hand during the Middle Ages and then copied by hand, many of the medieval Jewish poets used an ACROSTIC with their names so that people would know who the author was—in case a copyist forgot to add the poet's name to a copy.

MAGIC BOWLS

Magic bowls, also known as incantation bowls, are pottery bowls featuring biblical verses, spells, decorative designs, and sometimes pictures. The best-known ones come from ancient Babylonia and contain various kinds of spells, among them those protecting expectant mothers from miscarriage and all members of a family from bad neighbors and from various kinds of evil spirits. Sometimes the bowls were placed under the corners of a house.

You can make your own bowl by using a paper food bowl, marking pens, and watercolor paint. An easy design is in the shape of a spiral: You write a biblical verse or make up your own charm or prayer and write it in a spiral, starting either in the middle and working your way out or on the outside and ending up in the middle. An easy one might be an original prayer you write for better health for a sick parent or grandparent; if you do this type, be sure to use the person's name. You will need to experiment with paper bowls and writing instruments and paints to see what works. Be sure to keep a log or diary of your efforts.

If you have access to a pottery class or studio or are handy with clay, you can make a pottery bowl and use it instead of a paper bowl. If you look on the Internet you will see examples of old bowls. These are fascinating, so it's an activity that is interesting, fun, and meaningful.

MAGIC CARPETS AND WALL HANGINGS

Many cultures create cloth objects like carpets and wall hangings containing religious images and words from religious texts.

Design and create your own.

MAGAZINES

You probably are familiar with magazines, whether Jewish ones, children's ones, or ones for adults. They usually contain one or more of the following features: letters to the editor, announcements for movies, book reviews, articles, cartoons, photos, puzzles, and ads.

Create a magazine using work created in your class by you and your fellow students. Make copies and give to your fellow students, friends, family, teachers, rabbi, and other people you think might be interested. You also could create an online magazine on Facebook, or you could create your own web site or blog. Another possibility is recording the writing using the voice recorder on your cell phone and having an audiomagazine. If you are handy with a videocamera you also could try creating video with people reading their work. If you are even more tech-savvy, create a video for YouTube.

METER

Meter is a rhythmic scheme used in some poetry to make it more musical. Usually meter is set using accented words and a repeating number of syllables in the lines, for example:

The RAIN in SPAIN falls HARD upON the PLAIN.

This line is in the popular meter of iambic pentameter, which has five accents on the even-numbered words or syllables

Medieval Hebrew poetry often uses a different technique, with short and long syllables defined by the vowel sounds of the words.

Try writing a poem using iambic pentameter. Start with a couplet, which is two closely related lines. Then try adding more couplets until you have a longer poem.

MEZUZAH

A *mezuzah* is an amulet biblically commanded to be affixed to the doorposts of a house; it contains the *Shema*, the central Jewish affirmation of faith.

Make your own *mezuzah* amulet and write your own *mezuzah* scroll.

MIDRASH I

Midrash, from the Hebrew root "*derash*," which means "to dig," is an important form of writing that usually amplifies or interprets a biblical text; often a *midrash* fills in what hasn't been said in a biblical text. However, not all *midrashim* (the plural of *midrash*) do this.

Write your own *midrash* on a favorite biblical story. You might, for example, take a biblical passage about Passover and try explaining how the Red Sea could have been parted *without* the involvement of God? Or, God would be involved, but how could God, who seems so far away, do what he did?

MIDRASH II

Select a topic or person in the Bible that you do not fully understand. Dig deeply into the story or think deeply about the person and do your own *MIDRASH*, in which you explain what you don't understand. You may need to fill in some missing parts of the story or be imaginative about why a certain character does what he or she is doing.

MY SKINNY LITTLE JEWISH BOOK

As you know, books are very important to Jews, which is why we often are called "the people of the book."

Write your own book that includes personal information as well as poems and other writing that is important to you. In some way this book will be a diary or journal that says who you are.

Sections you could include are:

your name and the names of family members and friends, and something about each one.
a peace letter to the world or to individuals describing your ideas on how to create peace in the world.
a travelogue to Israel, if you have been there.
the words to a favorite song. Be sure to credit the author or composer.
an ACROSTIC poem that contains words some of whose letters spell your name, for example:

Happy I am
In the universe.
Except on the Moon,
Where there is too much
Yucky cheese.

MYSTICISM

Mysticism is supposed to be a deeper level of religious understanding.

Do a little reading on Jewish mysticism, *kabbalah*, and the *Zohar* (the *Book of Splendor*). Find an illustration of the tree of life and see if you can understand what it is showing. To start you off: One interpretation is that it illustrates qualities of God that humans also have—for example, judgment and kindness.

Now, make your own tree of life and fill in the qualities with your own words. For example, for "kindness" you might say "being nice to other people."

NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The famous Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810) had a very strong connection to the natural world and believed in praying outdoors.

Go into your garden or on a nature hike with family or friends and observe what is around you—what you see, touch, smell, hear, and experience in general. Take notes on paper or on your electronic device using the voice recorder.

Then, either while still outside or after you go inside, write up what you saw in a diary or poem or prose poem. A prose poem is writing that is not divided into stanzas like a poem but that has many of the elements of a poem, like rhyme, meter, figures of speech, unusual spacing, etc. If you are good at drawing, add pictures of what you saw and combine them with words.

NEWS STORIES

News stories convey information about people and happenings.

Take an event in Jewish history—in the Bible or another period, like today—and pretend you are a reporter sent to cover the event for a Jewish magazines, newspaper, or television or radio program. Write up what you see, hear, smell, and touch, and whom you meet and talk to. Include quotations from one or more "interviews" you do with people at the event.

NOAH AND THE ARK

The early biblical figure Noah took two each of a variety of animals onto the ark when the flood came.

Do a poetic bestiary that has one animal for each stanza and that tells the reader something about the animals. Also, there is room to add more animals. If the Torah says two horses, for examples, you could add two donkeys, two camels, two mules, two hippopotami, and so on. You also can have the animals talk—How do they feel about getting into the ark? Are they happy? Afraid? Allow yourself to get carried away with the animals: For example, you could make up songs they are singing. Have Fun!

PALIMPSEST

A palimpsest is a document that contains text written over other text, which usually has been erased. Often these were created because paper was very expensive, so this was an early form of recycling.

Experiment with making your own palimpsest. You might start by writing something on a piece of paper, or creating something on your computer and printing it out. You could use something you wrote for one of the other writing activities you have done. Then erase some or all of the writing so that only faint letters and words remain. Now, write something new over this on the same paper. If you are using your computer, put the original piece of writing—with the erasures—into your printer paper tray and print something *new* over it. Experiment with the process: For example, maybe you prefer to write something and then, without make any erasures, write something new *between* the words in the first piece of writing. Here is an example of what I mean:

ForROSESexample,ARE maybe you prefer RED to write something VIOLETS and then ARE BLUE, without make any erasures, write something new *between* the words (either with or without spaces) in the first piece of writing.

Using this approach, you could even try to make the new words fit into what you first wrote, like I did here: maybe you prefer RED. Experiment too with different types of handwriting or computer printer typefaces or fonts, or even with colors.

PAPER

Jews are known as "the people of the book." Books are made from materials such as paper, papyrus (crushed and processed reeds), cloth, and parchment (made from animal hide).

Experiment with whatever materials you can find and try one of the writing activities—or make up a new one—on this material. If you have the ability, technique, and materials, try making your own paper and experiment with writing on it.

PARADE OF CHARADES

A charade is a game in which the players act out a story or a series of words and the audience tries to guess the story or the words. When the game is done without sound, the technique is called pantomime. A mime is someone who tells a story through pantomime.

Create a charade using a Bible scene. Have fun and add other characters. Start with notes like this:

Characters: Sarah and Abraham and their dog Tom.

Props and sets: Goats, staff, apples, tent.

Stage directions: Sarah is on stage. Abe will come on the stage from the left. Tom is in a corner of the tent chewing on a bone.

Music and sound effects: Snoring. (If it's pantomime, then no actual sounds, but movements or facial expresses that indicate snoring.)

Now, get to work with your plan and try out your charade with friends, family, or classmates.

PASSOVER MIDRASH DIARY

Passover tells the story of the Exodus of Jews from Egypt in ancient times, as recounted in the Hebrew Bible's Book of Exodus. A *MIDRASH* interprets or fills in the blanks in a story or description or other Jewish text. In the Passover story, the *HAGGADAH*, we know some of the basics but not much more.

We are going to use *MIDRASH* to help fulfill the mitzvah of telling and reliving the Passover story:

"We are obliged to regard ourselves as though we ourselves actually went out of Egypt."

Start with a blank piece of paper or page in your notebook and write:

"I, [your name]_____, am leaving Egypt because . . ." Use plenty of details, like the time of day, day of the week, month, a description of what you are wearing, whether you are happy or sad, if you are tired, what you ate along the way, what you saw and touched and smelled, what you dreamt about at night, whether it was hot or cold, did you have any rain, what you said to your family and friends, whether your pet dog or cat came along, and so on." Illustrate your story with drawings.

PASSOVER COMMENTARY

A commentary is usually a set of "comments"—opinions, interpretations, stories, etc.—on a piece of writing like a biblical passage. Such a commentary delivered in a synagogue might be called a sermon, or in Hebrew, a *derash*.

Create your own commentary on one part of the *HAGGADAH* that ties in with what is happening in your school, or city, or synagogue, or the world today.

PEREK SHIRAH

Perek Shirah (Chapters of Song) is a fascinating but little-known book containing verses from the Bible that have to do with nature. You can view a copy on the Internet at <http://zootorah.com/assets/media/perek-shirah-booklet.pdf> or <https://opensiddur.org/prayers/in-the-siddur/daytime/morning/perek-shira-chapter-of-song/> .

Here are two examples from *Perek Shirah* (from the second web site above) to give you an idea of what that book is about but be sure to read more on the Internet or if your teacher or rabbi has a printed book or printout:

The Lightning Bolts are saying, "...He [God] makes lightning for the rain; He brings forth the wind from his storehouses."

The Pomegranate is saying, "...Your brow is like a piece of a pomegranate behind your braids."

We are going to write our own Nature Book, but instead of using what the different parts of nature are saying, as in *Perek Shirah*, we are going to BE those parts of nature and give voice to them. For example, you could change the previous two verses as follows:

"I am lightning bolts saying God makes lightning for the rain. . . ."

"I am a pomegranate saying your brow is like a piece of pomegranate behind your braids."

Here are three verses I just made up:

"I am a bald eagle who is saying how wonderful it is to fly so high above the earth." Or: "I am a dandelion flower telling people to admire my beautiful yellow flowers." Or: "I am the sound of the wind at night saying thank you God for making me so special."

Write your own verses about things that are not created by human beings. So, no cell phones, cars, toys, books, music, etc.

Each line must begin with the words I AM and include the word SAYING.

When you have finished one draft, go back and add one more FIGURES OF SPEECH, RHYMES, or modifiers (like "delightfully delicate" in the following example), etc. For example: "I am a delightfully delicate dandelion flower saying look at my beautiful yellow fun flowers that are as yellow as an egg yolk."

PERSONAL THEOLOGY

Theology is the study of God and beliefs about God, and a theologian is someone who studies God and beliefs about God.

Become a theologian and write up your own personal beliefs about God.

PLAY

A play is a performance with one or more participants and usually a set and props.

Write and perform a play about a famous Jew. The play will have one or more characters and be primarily a monologue (one person talking all the time) or a dialogue (two or more people talking). Start by making notes about the characters, set, props, costumes, music, etc. Then write up the words. Use your own words, not words from the Bible or other Jewish texts. You could use this kind of format:

Sarah: I want to have children. [sighs]

Abraham: I want to also, but aren't we kind of old? [raises his hands to the sky]

Sarah: Maybe we should ask God? [smiles]

etc.

See also PARADE OF CHARADES.

POETRY

Poetry has been written and recited for at least several thousand years, and it is part of the Hebrew Bible. However, what exactly poetry is, is difficult to define. When it occurs in the Bible, it sometimes is set off from the surrounding text by the way it is formatted, and this is one clue to how to tell poetry from prose, which usually does not have special formatting.

However, prose can be written to look like poetry, and poetry to look like prose. In addition, prose can be poetic, and poetry can be prosaic, or quite ordinary.

That said, poetry usually contains lines divided into stanzas to separate images, thoughts, ideas, etc.

Features of poetry may include often colorful language, FIGURES OF SPEECH like metaphors and similes, RHYME, sound effects like ALLITERATION and ASSONANCE, rhythmic effects like METER, and good DESCRIPTION. However, some poetry contains none of these features, and some prose contains some or all. Also, poems may contain lines divided into stanzas and might be written in what are called fixed forms like sonnets and haiku, which follow patterns and other rules. But again, some poetry does none of this.

For the most part, I tend to think that children almost intuitively understand what poetry is and how it differs from prose. I recommend that teachers might begin with the question, "What is poetry," and see how your students respond. You can then decide how much time to spend in the sessions on forms and techniques. Although many of the assignments contain parameters to follow—for example, adding figures of speech or description—I do recommend adding parameters to all of the assignments so that students become familiar with rhyme, metaphors, *midrash*, etc.

PRAYER

In a prayer you might express gratitude for something or ask for something.

Write your own prayer or prayers.

PRAYER BOOK

A prayer book—in Hebrew a *siddur*—is a collection of prayers.

Create your own prayer book, either using some of your favorite prayers from an existing prayer book, or using prayers you write yourself, or perhaps a combination of the two.

PRAYER POEM

A prayer poem is a prayer that looks and sounds like a poem, or vice versa.

Try writing an alphabetic ACROSTIC prayer poem that praises God for creating light and the lights in our lives and in the heavens. Your theme should be light or lights. For inspiration, take a look at one of the most important Jewish prayers, the *yotzer or*, which praises God for creating light. But, no cheating; do your own.

Try using some of the following key words in your prayer poem: blessed, generous, God, knowledge, holiness or holy, lights, light, people, praise, sunlight.

Begin the first line with a word beginning with A, the second with a word beginning with B, and so on.

PSALMS

Psalms are biblical poems with varying agendas and purposes, including praising or blessing God, lamenting, and asking God for help. The Bible contains 150 psalms.

Read a few of them to get the idea of what they are up to and then write your own. You might want to write it in the form of an alphabetic ACROSTIC, which each line starting with a word beginning with a letter of the alphabet arranged A-Z. For example:

Angels are wonderful
Because they have magic powers
Contained in their
Delicate wings.

Be sure to use lots of interesting words. You also could include RHYMES or write the psalm as an ACROSTIC.

PURIM CONVERSATIONS

Purim is the spring holiday in which the Jews of ancient Persia are saved from extinction by a couple of heroic Jews. God does not appear in the story, except perhaps by His absence.

Try writing some conversations between participants or props in the Purim story. Here is a short list of possibilities that you can draw from, or choose your own. Not all of these are actually in the Megillah of Esther: Queen Vashti and Zeresh, the wife of Haman. God and Mordechai's (Mordecai's) horse. Vashti's advisor and Esther. Haman and the stake he was impaled on. Mordechai and the tree Haman was hung on.

PURIM HAIKU

A *haiku* is a traditional Japanese form of poetry. A haiku usually has three lines, with the first line

having 5 syllables, the second line 7 syllables, and third line 5 syllables. Often the third line is a surprise or doesn't smoothly follow the second line.

Write one of these about Purim. Here is a not-very-good example: "King Ahasuerus/He wanted his wife to dance/He chopped off her head." You could do the haiku as a question or riddle: "Who is the new queen/The one who is a beauty?/Her cousin is brave."

PURIM SPIEL

A *Purim spiel* (or *Purimspiel*) is a fun, even silly or ridiculous monologue or skit or play that somehow fits with the holiday of Purim. Write a *Purim spiel* for, or with, your friends, family, or class.

RESPONSA

A *responsa* is a letter or other document that responds (*responsa* = response) to a legal question posed to a rabbinic authority. Many of these, often written by famous rabbis, such as Maimonides, have been preserved over the years, and they continue to be written.

Find a law or rule, Jewish or not, that you want to criticize or otherwise comment on, and write your own *responsa*.

RIDDLE

A riddle is a kind of verbal puzzle that makes you scratch your head and that sometimes but not always has a deeper meaning. Riddles are often framed as questions; you ask a question about something that might be mysterious, and don't give the answer. Some Jews recite or recited special riddles at weddings.

Here are a few riddles that I made up:

1. What is it that's usually invisible by day and sometimes white at night? (Answer: The moon.)
2. I am sleeping. Someone needs something from me to create the first girl. It's something that when found in a cow some people want to barbecue and eat. I am not a chef or a cow. What am I? (Answer: A rib.)
3. I am very old and made of stone. I have walls to protect me. People write on little pieces of paper, fold the paper, and put it between my stones. Some of the people sing and dance in front of me. What am I? (Answer: The remains of the Temple in Jerusalem.)

Now make up your own riddle or riddles about something Jewish.

RHYME

Everyone knows what rhyme is: Two words that have similar sounds, like Fine and Line, or Boat and Float. These are perfect rhymes. Rhymes also can be imperfect, like Fine Time and Clean Dream. Some rhymes are even farther apart, like Zebra and Amoeba. Traditional poetry usually uses lots of rhyme at the end of lines. Some poems have rhyme schemes, usually notated with letters. This ditty would be notated AA BB:

A good rhyme
Comes at the end of a good line.

A bad one
Isn't much fun.

Jewish poets in the Middle Ages, who wrote a lot of poetry, used different rhyme schemes in their poems, though sometimes they were very basic, where the last word of all the lines had the same rhyme. Some of these poets also wrote rhymed prose, which sounded less poetic except for the end rhymes of the lines.

Try writing a short poem using a rhyme scheme you make up.

SCRIBES

From ancient times to the present, scribes served and often still serve to write and read documents like letters and contracts for people who couldn't or can't read or write. In ancient times and the Middle Ages, most people couldn't read or write, and today many people still cannot. Scribes also copied religious texts, including the Bible, before the invention of the printing press, in the fifteenth century. Today scribes may use a typewriter or personal computer. In some places in India, for example, I have seen tables set up on the street where you can have someone write something for you.

Scribes are not perfect, however; in the past when they copied biblical texts they accidentally made changes, and other times they changed something they thought could be said better or differently, or because they didn't understand what they were writing.

Experiment with being a scribe and see what you learn. First, copy something, for example, a prayer from the prayer book, or perhaps a favorite psalm. You also could work with a partner or friend to write something for them: The other person could dictate what she wants to say, and you write it down. Then read it back to the person and see if you got it right.

SCROLLS

Before there were books as we know them, people often wrote on scrolls, often made of parchment or of papyrus, which is made from a special kind of reed. You may be familiar with the Book of Esther, which originally was written on a scroll, called a *megillah*. A scroll was handy because it could be rolled up and therefore not take up a lot of space. Again, scrolls were made before there were books as we know them.

The most famous ancient scrolls are the Dead Sea Scrolls, which contain biblical books, letters, and other documents. Although hidden and stored in caves in Israel for about two thousand years, they are very well preserved. Still, they are not perfect, and scholars, since their first discovery in 1947, have spent a great deal of time figuring out some of the writing and also reconstructing what is incomplete.

Obtain a large piece of paper—for example, butcher paper, or a roll of paper sold at a hobby store—and experiment with making a scroll. You could copy onto it something from the Bible, or a story you like, or you could write a poem on it.

SERMONS

Sermons are lectures on something religious or on subjects that usually are serious and important. A lot of these are boring, but they don't have to be. In Italy a few hundred years ago a rabbi gave sermons that were so interesting that Catholics priests and monks came to the synagogues where he preached in order to hear him sermonize. Yes, this rabbi was so good that he preached at different synagogues.

Write an interesting sermon on a subject you care about. Use some humor or catchy phrases. See if your rabbi will let you read or recite (from memory) the sermon at a religious service.

SEVEN DAYS OF CREATION

As you know, the Bible begins by describing the seven days of Creation. The Book of Genesis is pretty specific about what happened on each of the days, but there is a lot of room to add your own ideas.

Write a poem with seven stanzas, each based on one of the seven days of Creation. Refer to the entry above for *MIDRASH* for some ideas.

SHABBAT

Perhaps because Shabbat is a day of rest, I didn't write any activities when I was teaching at the Boulder Jewish Day School. However, there are many possibilities.

1. Decorate Shabbat candles and your menorah (with nonflammable decorations). These candles could be left in a menorah during the week, and plain candles burned for Shabbat.
2. Write a poem or other form of writing about your Shabbat experience, what you love about Shabbat, what you do or don't do on Shabbat, whom you spend Shabbat with, your favorite prayers and songs, and so on.
3. Write the commandment to observe Shabbat on a clay tablet.
4. Do some research to see if Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi Jews celebrate Shabbat the same or differently.
5. Talk to your parents or grandparents (or great-grandparents) or aunts and uncles to see if they have any special stories or customs related to Shabbat.
6. If you know the origin of your family (e.g., Lithuania), do some research to find out how Shabbat is or was celebrated there, what people wore, if there were any unusual customs, what people ate and drank, etc.
7. With some friends or relatives, design your own Shabbat service, to be conducted at home.
8. If you didn't have a calendar or a watch or clock and couldn't see the sun because of a total eclipse of the sun, how would you know when Shabbat begins? If you couldn't see the three stars that mark the end of Shabbat, how would you know it had ended?
9. Now, think of your own Shabbat activities—or perhaps they should be called *inactivities*!

SHIVITI

A *shiviti* is a picture used to meditate on and to remind you of God. It is based on a line from Psalm 16:8 that says: "I have set [*shiviti*] the Lord [God] [Hashem] always before me."

Create a painting or drawing or object (like a piece of clay shaped like a circle or rectangle) that contains these words in English or Hebrew or both.

SMELLOGRAM

A smellogram is something in writing that you create that has some nice smells.

Create Jewish poems using smells from markers, spices, scented paper, etc.

SONGS

Songs are words set to music. The songs we are familiar with in services or other Jewish events and venues may be called "traditional," but often are not. Some of the tunes have been lifted from popular music that is not even Jewish.

Write your own tunes and music to accompany prayers, blessings, etc. Or, write your own lyrics for existing Jewish melodies. Experiment with different tunes for, say, *lecha dodi*, to see if they work.

SPIRITUALITY

My mother was not religious and didn't believe in God, but her friends thought she was very spiritual. What is the difference between religion and spirituality? To me religion seems more about ritual and tradition, like celebrating Shabbat, while spirituality seems more about appreciating what is special about life, nature, and human beings. Some religious people are spiritual, and some spiritual people are religious, but other religious people don't seem very spiritual, and many spiritual people aren't religious in the least.

Describe your own ideas about religion and spirituality. Are you religious? Do you believe in God? Are you spiritual? Do certain things in life, including a religious celebration like Shabbat, make you feel emotional? After you have written about your ideas, turn them into a poem using figures of speech, rhyme, rhythm, and good descriptions. Finally, go over your poem and make sure the spelling, punctuation, etc., are as good as you can make them.

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

The Bible reminds us that since we once were strangers in a strange land we should treat other people with hospitality. In fact, hospitality is one of the most important traditional Jewish values.

Pretend that you have landed in a Jewish country that no one has ever seen or heard of before. You will be writing postcards to friends and family at home that imaginatively describe, in pictures and words, what you discover in this country.

What are some of the things you might describe? Here are a few ideas: what the people look like, the climate, the food, the music, what the houses look like, toys and games, animals and plants, what people find funny, what the stars look like at night, the stories about how the country originated, if there are synagogues what they look like, how people pray, and so on.

Write a series of postcards each of which takes on one of these subject. For example: "Today I ate a strange kosher ice cream made from a green plant that tasted like spinach." Let your imagination soar!

SUKKOT AROUND THE WORLD

Sukkot is the wonderful Fall holiday following Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur celebrating the period after our ancestors left Egypt and wandered in the desert. During this time our ancestors built and lived in booths called *sukkot* (singular = *sukkah*). To commemorate this period of our history, many of us make a *sukkah*, eat our meals in it, and invite in the matriarchs and patriarchs and family members, dead or alive, to join us. Sukkot also celebrates the Fall harvest.

Do some research on the Internet and see what you can find on Sukkot customs in different cities and countries, past and present. Then, pick one city or country, write up what you have learned, see if you can find photos or drawings to go with what you write, and do a show-and-tell with your class. If you are really talented at building, see if next Sukkot you can design and build a *sukkah* that looks like one of the ones you found.

SYNAGOGUE

A synagogue, of course, is a place—or one place—where Jews pray today. Strangely, the word *synagogue* is a Greek word!

Build a model synagogue and decorate it with excerpts from Jewish texts like the Bible. Some editions of the Bible—and web site—show what people think the Temple in Jerusalem looked like. Also, if you are interested, do some research to find out why Jews name their place of worship with a Greek word.

TALMUD

The Talmud is a series of books containing the discussions of rabbis who lived from a couple of hundred years before the common era until it was compiled in the sixth century of the common era. Some of the discussions are around Jewish laws, while others are stories. It is laid out with the Mishnah—the earliest rabbinic discussions and laws—in the middle of the page, surrounded by the Gemara, which are the comments of other rabbis on the Mishnah.

Find a copy of the Talmud in your school or synagogue or home library, or if you can't find a book, go online and see what a page of Talmud looks like. Now write your own Mishnah—maybe a statement about something that concerns you. Make copies and give to friends, family, or fellow students. Now discuss the Mishnah that you wrote. If possible, record the discussion on your phone or music player or even a tape recorder, if you have one. After you are done, transcribe the discussion in the form in which such discussions appear in the Talmud. Now you have your own, modern Talmud!

THE TEN PLAGUES

A plague is something awful that happens and often spreads to a lot of people or animals. You know that God sent plagues to Egypt to "encourage" Pharaoh to let the Jews leave Egypt. The ten plagues are: blood, frogs, lice, flies, pestilence (disease), boils, hail, locusts, darkness, killing of the firstborn. During the Passover seders we recite the ten plagues while dipping one finger in a cup of wine or grape juice and putting one drop on our plate.

For this activity, imagine that you are *one of the plagues*. Some questions you might try to answer about yourself as a plague could be: Who are you? What are you? Do you have a name or names? What

do people call you? Why are you where you are? What do you look like? What color are you? What are you made of? How big or small are you? What shape are you? Does Pharaoh like you? Do plants and animals like you? How do you feel about Moses, Aaron, and the other Israelites? Are you happy being a plague? These are just starter questions. You can write this up as a story, a poem, a list, or a VISUAL POEM, or even make it a song.

TRANSLATION

Translation is the process of converting something written in one language to another language. For example, a novel written in Spanish might be translated into English, for people who cannot read Spanish. Translations have been around for thousands of years. For example, in ancient times in many regions of the Middle East the main spoken language was Aramaic. Though similar to Hebrew, it is a different language. Religious services often had someone translate biblical texts and prayers from Hebrew into Aramaic or another local language so that people could understand.

Translations can range from literal—"word for word" to "inspired by." Most translations are somewhere between. For example, a very literal translation might sound stilted, and you might have trouble matching effects like alliteration (awful animals, cuddly cats) and rhyme. A very loose translation could be very interesting and even include lots of sound effects but not have much to do with the original text.

Translate a Hebrew text into your own English, or vice versa, if you are good at Hebrew. If you also speak or read Spanish or another modern language, you could translate into one of these languages. If you only know one language, pretend to translate something in that language into another language.

Hello? Here's an example of what I mean:

1A. Translate a Hebrew text into your own English. 1B. Take something written in Hebrew and make a version in English. 2A. If you also speak or read Spanish or another modern language, you could translate into one of these languages. 2B. In case you know Spanish or another language spoken today, turn the Hebrew passage into that language. 3A. If you only know one language, pretend to translate something in that language into another language. 3B. If all you know is one language, see if you can create something that appears to be a translation.

I'm not saying these are good examples, but if your language skills are limited, perhaps they will inspire you to make up a translation.

By the way, the Bible and sometimes non-biblical writing (like the Finnish national epic, *The Kalevala*) often have passages or are entirely written in a way that sounds like the above examples. There will be a line or sentence that says something, and the next line or sentence will express the same thing as the first line or sentence but with different words or with the words in a different order. In the study of the Bible, the term for such repetition is *parallelism*.

VISUAL POEMS

Visual poems, also called concrete poems or picture poems, are poems in shapes—for example, a poem in the shape of an hourglass or an animal. The shape reinforces the meaning of the poem. This kind of poetry is actually quite old, even though it sounds modern.

Create poetry in different shapes, e.g., a whale, a candle, a yarmulke, a hand, an eye, the ten commandments, a fish, Noah's ark, Mt Sinai, Moses. Use words from the Bible or from prayers. Start with the design and add the words, or start with the words and make them into a matching design. For example, use words from the story of Jonah and the whale and write a poem in the shape of a whale. You also can use cut-up pages from newspapers or magazines, construction paper, sparkles and stickers, and other "props." For example, you could cut large green words from a magazine article and paste them into your poem in the appropriate place. The result could be a beautiful collage!

WALKING TOUR OF A JEWISH COUNTRY

Pick a country to visit, either one that exists now, like England, which has Jews living in it; or one that had Jews but no longer does or that now has very few, like India. Or pick a country that had Jews but no longer exists. You also could pick a country like Spain, which exists today, has a long history, had a lot of Jews living in it in the past (and relatively few in the present), and visit in, say, *the tenth century*. Of course, to do this you will need to do some research. If you've got a time machine, use it now.

Pretend taking a guided walking tour of some of the Jewish sights. Write about your tour in prose couplets that RHYME. A couplet is two lines that usually have something to do with each other. Writing based on rhyming couplets was used in the Middle Ages by Jewish writers. Each couplet will describe at least one thing Jewish you experienced on the tour. Use lots of details. Here is an example:

We passed a beautiful synagogue made of pure white **stone**.
We sang a pretty song in Spanish in a very high **tone**.

HAPPY WRITING!