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Contributed by Administrator

Shalom
Sesame: Judaism for the iGeneration

By: Shira
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Introduction

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The production and launch of Shalom Sesame in December 2000 are landmark events in the world of Jewish Education.Â

For the first time, new technologies and a global brand have been harnessed to create compelling Jewish content for young children and their families. Unprecedented in scope, Shalom Sesame is also a collaboration between a recognized giant in the world of general educational media, Sesame Workshop, and the professional Jewish early childhood community.

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Jointly conceived and produced by teams at Channel Hop! in Israel Â and Â Sesame Workshop in the United States, the project offers an interesting perspective on Israel - Diaspora dialogue and the analysis of the final products can serve as digital text which upon study, reveals the very different ways Judaism, Israel and Jewish life mayÂ perceived by colleagues on different sides of the ocean.

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More and more studies are being devoted to the impact of media rich curriculum in the early childhood classroom. Â A number of studies have shown that digital technologies hold tremendous promise for improving learning in

K-12 schools, but technology use in preschool has been controversial. Critics argue that television and computers have no role in an active preschool classroom in which teachers seek to create a learning environment that promotes interaction among them and the children. Â

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A recent study commissioned by PBS as a part of the evaluation of their Ready to Learn Initiative found that that preschool teachers who implement a curriculum that integrates video content with a range of other activities improved children's literacy skills.Â All

of the studies stress the importance of adult mediation of the media in order to achieve maximum impact. The newly revised NAEYC position paper Technology in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8 mentions the crucial role of the teacher in determining which media are appropriate and how media will be used. One can also conclude that effective media usage is only achievable when combined with the full range of more traditional strategies.

Seven months post launch, the Shalom Sesame educational team is monitoring the use of the project assets and engaging a variety of partners to reach the broadest possible audience. Surprisingly, and contrary to initial surveys that indicated that the early childhood classroom would be a primary arena for use of the material, we are finding that there is a great deal of resistance on the part of Jewish early childhood educators to use these new tools to invite, engage and stimulate children's Jewish learning.

The presentation of Shalom Sesame at this conference is designed to trigger conversation around this issue, pinpoint some of the reasons for this phenomenon, examine biases towards media and challenge participants to reflect upon their own attitudes towards the integration of the new media in the Jewish early childhood classroom. It is hoped that participants will come away with an understanding that technology and media are powerful tools in the context of learning relationships as well as some new thoughts about or what television and Internet can do that even the most gifted of educators can't.

Shalom Sesame: The Vision

In the Talmud, in Tractate Shabbat, we find the phrase "Girsa d'yankuta lo mishtakchei" which is understood to mean, "The learning of one's childhood is not forgotten." One expansion on this understanding might be that the quality of early childhood experiences and their "memorableness" is what gives them their life long staying power.

Memorable Jewish childhood learning is more important now than ever before as the numbers of Jews who remain unengaged with Jewish life grows. We know that families, who become meaningfully engaged when their children are young, are more likely to continue that engagement as the family matures. Current research on early engagement indicates that young families are seeking connection, but on their own terms and in forms that are familiar and easily accessible.

While the challenge has never been greater, there have never been so many tools available to meet this challenge. The youngest members of today's Jewish community and their parents are digital natives who actively seek content experiences on a variety of platforms. Creating meaningful, memorable Jewish learning experiences for families, a digital Girsa de yankuta, is the core of the Shalom Sesame project.

The JECA Journal: First
Years -

Shalom Sesame: The Process

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Background

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Â Â Â Â Â Â During the last decade of the twentieth century, the American Jewish community engaged in a lively debate about the future of Jewish life in the United States. Surveys were conducted, studies were commissioned, conferences were held, and hands were wrung. There was plenty of disagreement about what was necessary to ensure "Jewish continuity" and "Jewish identity," particularly among the younger generations, who would, in fact, constitute the Jewish people in the twenty-first century.

Â Â Â Â Â Â There are some 700,000 Jewish children between the ages of birth and six in the United States today. As schools and homes take on the challenge of making Judaism and Israel relevant to their youth, the role of media looms large. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that nearly 80% of American children ages 3-8 regularly use computers. Yet while the technological landscape has burst with innovation since the first incarnation of Shalom Sesame was released in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the landscape of Jewish media has not and is only now, very slowly beginning to change. The gap between the ongoing technological advances and their use in Jewish education and communal life is not closing as fast as it could be. . Â

Â Â Â Â Â Â Building on the success of the original 1986 version of Shalom Sesame and more than twenty-five years of experience working in Israel to co-produce the Israeli adaptation of Sesame Street (Rechov Sumsum), Sesame Workshop hoped that the new Shalom Sesame initiative would be the leading multi-media educational product to address this need within Jewish schools and families. Â As stated in an early position paper written in the pre production phase:

Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shalom Sesame aims to spark the interest and imagination of a new generation of Jewish American children and to "shrink the world" - or at least the distance between the United States and Israel - in ways that Sesame Workshop is uniquely qualified to do. The Workshop approaches this project as a virtual vehicle for children ages 3-7, their families, and those working in the field of Jewish education across formal and informal settings.

Â Â Â Â Â Â While Shalom Sesame aims to be a resource across the wide spectrum of the Jewish community, the primary target audience of the initiative will be those who are currently "minimally engaged" in Jewish life. This is the group defined as most in need of engaging and relevant content; indeed, those who express some interest or inclination for engagement with Jewish life are those for whom the Shalom

Sesame educational tools have the propensity to make the most meaningful impact through reach and delivery within existing distribution infrastructure. Additionally, Shalom Sesame will be a resource for those who are presently unaffiliated or disengaged with Jewish life, as well as a much needed creative approach for those already firmly ensconced in Jewish life".

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Phase One: Creating a Theoretical Framework for Production

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Â Â Â Â Â The success of Sesame Workshop in the world is largely due to a strict adherence to a creative process informed by research and consultation with experts in fields relevant to the themes to be addressed in production. The process was no different for Shalom Sesame and work on the project began as all Sesame projects do, with a preliminary content seminar.

Â Â Â Â Â The goal of the meeting, held in January, 2008, in New York City, was to develop the educational framework for the new iteration of Shalom Sesame. Assisting Sesame Workshop in organizing the Content Seminar was the Consortium for the Jewish Family, a group of leading Jewish family educators who pioneered the field of Jewish family education. Together, leaders from Sesame Workshop and the Consortium invited 32 participants to the day-long Content Seminar, held at Sesame Workshop. By all accounts, the Content Seminar was a creative, purposeful and exciting day of deliberation. The day was organized to maximize the engagement of all participants.Â Â Working in small groups, the goals were:

To understand the characteristics of today's American Jewish family.

To develop an initial set of educational objectives.

To begin to create a project vision encompassing media platforms, distribution mechanisms, and the strengths and limitations of existing products. The work of each group was carefully recorded; the major ideas that emerged from the deliberations formed the basis of the curriculum that would later guide scriptwriters, animators and cast and crew during production.

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Â Â Â Â Â During the seminar, participants were asked to identify the most urgent needs facing Jewish Americans that a program like Shalom Sesame could address. Â Four central needs emerged:

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1) The first need is to build Jewish literacy and access in an inclusive and open way. Children and families, particularly the unaffiliated, have little access to Jewish stories, icons, heroes, and history.

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2) The second critical need is to reinforce family life in the Jewish community, as the family is a powerful source of learning and support, and a key site of value and culture transmission. In today's fast-paced society, families are incredibly busy and often lack the time and space to be and grow together. Yet the strength and character of the Jewish family is a central determinant of Jewish identity in children. There is a need, therefore, to strengthen both the 'Jewish-ness' and 'family-ness' of Jewish families in the United States. A primary goal of Shalom Sesame's new iteration will be to model strong and

engaged family life and practices, and to teach children and their families how to live Jewishly in the twenty-first century.

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3) The third need is to strengthen Jewish living and tradition within individuals,

families and communities. Despite the growth of Jewish day schools in the last few decades, many Jews living in the U.S. who are raising children have little connection to their Jewish identity and little knowledge base to teach their children about Jewish life. In this context, there is a pressing need to equip parents of young children with the information and skills for creating a Jewish family, irrespective of the level of religious observance. The modeling of joyous and meaningful Jewish living can be a powerful tool for parents and grandparents as much as children. Jewish living can include things such as celebrating holidays and Shabbat, living Jewish values, participating in a

synagogue or honoring the life cycle with Jewish rituals.

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4) A fourth need in American Jewish families is one that could not have been foreseen when the first version of Shalom Sesame was created fifteen years ago. The need is to reestablish a positive relationship between the Jewish community of the Diaspora and the Jewish homeland in Israel.

The days of hora-dancing halutzim prancing through the streets of Tel Aviv or the orange groves of a kibbutz are long over. The unresolved political situation has impacted the image of Israel in the minds and hearts of American Jews. There must be a concerted effort not only to present a realistic view of Israel to this

audience,

but to take steps to develop a personal relationship between Jewish families living here and there.

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Â Â Â Â Â The rationale for the new version of Shalom Sesame was quite clear: the need to build Jewish literacy among children and adults, strengthen the Jewish family, motivate Jewish living, and establish a positive relationship with Israel in the most creative way possible.

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Phase
Two: From Theory to Product

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Â Â Â Â Â Between January 2008 and December 2009, the above theoretical framework was deconstructed and reconstructed many times. A curriculum for the project was created; scripts were written, reviewed and approved. Story boards were drawn and animated and a concept for the website and social media platforms was articulated. It is important to mention that the production of Shalom Sesame was part of the larger production of a new season of Rechov Sumsum - the Israeli Sesame Street.Â
A large group of individuals, each with their own area of responsibility in the project began to work together to ensure the vision and the reality were as closely connected as possible.

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For close to six months, the creative and content teams of the new Shalom Sesame struggled to reach consensus on how to define certain Jewish concepts within a framework that would not allow the use of the word God, have characters performing certain rituals or using certain language and a host of other constraints placed on the project by Sesame Workshop policies around religion and nationality.Â This challenge coupled with the very broad audience the project hoped to serve, turned the creation of the raw production materials into a rigorous creative exercise that forced participants to reexamine their own understandings of things Jewish.

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Â A case in point is the concept of mitzvah which proved to be to be the thorniest to conceptualize and the toughest to bring to life in the framework of the series. The Hebrew word mitzvah means "commandment." Within Judaism, a mitzvah is understood to originate from the Divine and requires an action in order to fulfill it. Across the twelve episodes of the new Shalom Sesame series, many mitzvot are performed - building a sukkah, hosting guests, lighting the Chanukah candles and blowing the shofar, to name a few. They often are at the core of the story unfolding on Rechov Sumsum in each episode. But they are almost never labeled a mitzvah or mitzvot. In only one episode is the term mitzvah used by design and expanded upon. The episode content attempted to showcase everyday Jewish behaviors between people in the category of "doing," as opposed to "not doing" mitzvot.

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At first, it seemed simple. Any child who has heard a story that includes royalty is familiar with the word "command." It's a short leap to "commandment." However, as discussions proceeded and draft after draft of scripts were reviewed, it became apparent that Â using the word "commandment" would of necessity require Â a reference to Â who was commanding whom and the obligatory aspects of mitzvot. The questions only increased with each deliberation: Â If there is too much talk about Divine commandments and things one "has to do," will it alienate viewers for whom this is an introduction to Judaism? Â Will the other end of the spectrum be offended if God and mitzvah are not connected?

Can a family or child understand the concept of mitzvah in a deep Jewish sense if God and Torah are absent from the equation? Each series of deliberations led to another.

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Once a working definition of the concept had been reached, decisions needed to be made about which mitzvot would be showcased in the series. Should the focus be on mitzvot aseih, the ones that begin with "Thou shall" or mitzvot lo taaseh, the ones that begin with "Thou shall not"? Would it be overly didactic to label every action that is a mitzvah in the series as such? How could viewers - whether teachers, parents or children-construct their own understandings if we determined the meaning for them?

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The conversation continued on and on and the rigor of the debate revealed the different paths that could be taken. It forced every member of the team to be open to the different voices at the table and in and of itself was instructive with regards to how curriculum can and should be formulated, no matter what the media.

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In the end, two important decisions were reached: Mitzvah would be defined as a "rule from the Torah that teaches us how to behave and how to treat one another" and the decision to show mitzvot that could be understood and performed by young children in the various contexts in which they participate. Â Children are familiar with rules from both home and school. They have their own experience of rules to use as a tool for constructing an understanding of the concept. The focus would be on those mitzvot that are between people Â and it was felt that the introduction of the word and the concept "mitzvah" should be Â an invitation or provocation to learn more, take ownership and incorporate mitzvot, however defined, into home or classroom life.

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The idea was to provide the Jewish language associated with certain mitzvot and some of the mitzvah categories that are relevant to a young child's life. Among these are being kind and being concerned about ones community, visiting the sick, returning lost objects, and being kind to animals. It was also hoped that the way mitzvot would live in the series would foster a sense of obligation to be active in righting wrongs and doing what one can to "fix the world."

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There is a risk in playing it safe and trying to appeal to everyone. In trying to merge universal and particular thinking there is a chance that a child, parent or teacher may walk away understanding that a mitzvah is something Jewish people do. They may come away knowing about a few specific mitzvot, but without understanding the importance and weight of the concept in Judaism.

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Phase
Three: Shalom Sesame Revealed

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Â Â Â Â Â Â Following is a description of the result of a years work and dedication: Shalom Sesame.Â Â
A close reading of the text and the language used reveals many of the tensions that had to be mediated on the way to the realization of the vision for Shalom Sesame.

Â Â Â Â Â Â The new Shalom Sesame project includes twelve half-hour episodes on DVD, a website with material for children, families, and educators, and community events in partnership with organizations around the country.Â

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The goals of the new Shalom Sesame are to:

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Expand Jewish literacy;

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Explore Jewish holidays, rituals, and values;

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Introduce basics of the Hebrew language;

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Enrich understanding and knowledge about Israel; and,

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Deepen awareness about the diversity of the Jewish people.

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Shalom Sesame

is infused throughout with essential, core values of Jewish life. The project reflects key Jewish tenets - the primary role of home and family; the importance of kindness, consideration, and empathy; a vision of Israel as a sacred space for Jews and other faith communities; an experience of the Jewish festival cycle as a way to celebrate the present and connect to the past; and an understanding of the Torah as a source of valuable teachings.

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Episode Content

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Each episode in the series includes the following:

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A "Street Story"

Each episode opens with the "Street Story" that takes place on Rechov Sumsum or Sesame Street (רחוב סומסום). Each "Street Story" is split into several parts separated by a number of segments that relate to the themes of the unfolding drama.

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Short documentary segments

These mini-documentaries feature children from different backgrounds and places in Israel. They tell a story related to one of the series' core themes from a child's perspective.

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Animated segments

The animated segments feature the Hebrew months, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and creative interpretations of stories from Jewish sources. The Hebrew month animations showcase the key objects related to each of the twelve months on the Jewish calendar. Each of the twenty-two Hebrew letter animations introduces the letter of focus and three objects that begin with that letter. The animated stories are creative visual interpretations of original Jewish texts.

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A visit to a place in Israel

Each episode of Shalom

Sesame ends with a one-minute video "Postcard from Grover". Grover visits: Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Yaffo, Eilat, the Kinneret, the Hula Valley, Daliyat El Carmel, Bet Guvrin, Tzefat, the Judean and Negev deserts, and a Kibbutz.

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The Hebrew language

Hebrew language is featured in all of the episodes

through animations, the use of common greetings, phrases and holiday vocabulary, and the presentation of numbers.

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Segments from the Sesame Street library

Segments from the Sesame

Street Library are included in each episode: animations, live action films, songs, parodies, and others.

The library segments enhance and reinforce the messages in the series and highlight universal values that can be explored through a Jewish lens.

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Celebrity guest spots

Celebrities visit Shalom Sesame, and teach a concept,

word, or letter. These segments often riff on the celebrity's fame and experience.

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Pop-culture parodies with a "Jewish" twist

The fun song lyrics convey Jewish ideas and values, and
will make you •••••

laugh!

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Kids talk about...

In these interviews with children, kids offer their
knowledge and ideas about the topic of the episode.• They also share how they do things in their
homes.•

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Episode Themes

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Each
episode focuses on a specific topic:

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Welcome

to Israel and Adventures

in Israel are devoted to Israel. These episodes recount

Grover and Anneliese van der Pol's adventures and experiences visiting Israel.

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Grover

Learns Hebrew

features Grover as he learns the Aleph-Bet and encounters new Hebrew words.

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Mitzvah
on the Street is
devoted to kindness, caring, and helping others, and highlights actions that
compose everyday Jewish living.

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Shabbat
Shalom, Grover!
invites viewers to join Grover as he learns about the preparations and
celebrations associated with this weekly day of rest.

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The
Sticky Shofar
focuses on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, as Grover, Avigail, and Brosh learn a
valuable lesson in friendship and forgiveness, just in time to start the new
year.

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Monsters
in the Sukkah
presents Sukkot and Simchat Torah, as the neighborhood friends build (and then
rebuild!) their sukkah.

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Chanukah:
The Missing Menorah
celebrates the story and traditions of Chanukah.Â After Anneliese gets caught in a game of tag
and loses her special menorah, everyone works together to find it in time for
the start of the holiday.

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Grover
Plants a Tree
features Grover, Brosh, and Avigail as they learn how to plant trees in
celebration of Tu Bishvat.

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Be
Happy, It's Purim!
shares the story and traditions of Purim
as everyone dresses up in costume to celebrate the holiday.

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It's
Passover, Grover! focuses on the customs of the Passover Seder, the primary
ritual in the Passover holiday celebration. It begins with a predicament - it's
almost time for the seder, but there is no horseradish to be found!

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Countdown
to Shavuot showcases the holiday of Shavuot as Avigail and Brosh try to stay up all night, just like
the grown-ups.

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conclusion: The Shalom Sesame project is only really beginning now as
consumersÂ of the Shalom Sesame DVD's,
website www.shalomsesame.org and
YouTube channel engage with the digital content and begin to construct their
own understandings. Not all project goals were fulfilled equally and there is
criticism of the way certain aspects of Jewish life are portrayed.Â It
can only be hoped that in keeping with the Jewish tradition, Shalom Sesame may
be viewed as a Â digital text that is
enjoyed, learned, argued with and used for inspiration in the education of the
youngest members of the Jewish people.

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