

8 Gittel's Hands

by Erica Silverman

TOTAL RUNNING TIME

12:56

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The opening interview segment is appropriate for discussions of the concept that reading opens doors to other cultures and other people, the dangers of exaggeration and boasting, discussions of Judaism, gender bias, and feminism.

In Silverman's story *Gittel's Hands*, the title character is the daughter of Reb Yakov, the village's water carrier. He is proud of his daughter—perhaps too proud. He boasts of his daughter's accomplishments, making the girl embarrassed and worried for him. And his boasts earn him a warning from the Rabbi's wife: "Be careful, Reb Yakov . . . words, once spoken, are like little dybbuks . . . they dance around. They cause all kinds of trouble!"

But Yakov doesn't heed her advice and when times are hard, and money is not available to pay the haymaker, Reb Raya, Yakov boasts to him that Gittel's hands can create great things, like a matzoh cover with no more than a scrap of cloth and a piece of thread, or a holiday meal with no more than table scraps. The haymaker sees his chance to get Yakov's horse, water barrel, and wagon, and tries to cheat the old man by agreeing to a wager, but ONLY with the exact ingredients Yakov has mentioned. Poor Gittel, of course, cannot sew without a needle, nor cook without firewood. But though she cannot do the jobs Reb Raya has

ordered, she finds it in her kind heart to help a mysteriously injured dove and a starving cat.

The final task set before her is to create an Elijah's cup for the Passover feast with nothing more than the silver in a coin. Gittel sees a poor beggar freezing in the cold outside the cellar in which Reb Raya has locked her, and takes pity upon him, offering him her cloak for warmth. He transforms into Elijah the prophet before her eyes, accompanied by the dove and the cat she helped earlier. With Elijah's magic, Gittel learns to create beautiful, graceful silver pieces, including the ordered cup.

When Reb Raya returns with her father, Gittel refuses his offer of work, and informs her father she could not work for a man who tried to cheat him. And her father boasts once more: "My daughter speaks for herself . . . and she does it better than anyone else!"

SUGGESTED USAGE—MIDDLE SCHOOL

PRIOR TO THE PROGRAM

Remind students of the description of 19th-century America as a "melting pot" of immigrant cultures, languages, and traditions. Poll the class and make a list on the board or a flipchart of the many different nationalities represented just by the students in the room. Ask how many of them have learned of their own backgrounds and traditions. Ask if any learned more about their family's heritage through books.

WHILE VIEWING

Author Erica Silverman’s enjoyment of reading shines through in her gracious smile in this interview segment, in which she likens reading to “eating candy”—a real treat! Silverman offers the statement, “I can’t imagine life without books.” This sentence could provide an interesting topic for discussion: what *would* life be like without books?

The story segment of this episode provides a strong link for lessons on European history, geography, and multiculturalism. If you have time to screen the rest of the segment in class, do so.

AFTER VIEWING

- After viewing *Gittel’s Hands*, point out the characteristics of folklore and fable in Silverman’s children’s story. Have students write their own fable or fairy tale. Compare their stories to Silverman’s story, assessing similarities and differences.
- Have students research traditions, cultures, and customs of various countries. When all information is gathered, have students work in pairs to determine the similarities and differences in their findings. Have them create a Venn diagram to show how these different cultures overlap.
- Feminism is lightly touched upon in *Gittel’s Hands*, and the story provides an interesting basis for discussion, as well as a possible springboard for a short unit on feminism and its roots and themes. At the end of the story, Reb Yakov proudly denotes his daughter as someone who speaks for herself. Did he always feel this way? When did he change his viewpoint, and why?

SUGGESTED USAGE—ELEMENTARY

PRIOR TO THE PROGRAM

Inform your students they will be seeing an episode of the series *Heroes Read*, telling the story of a young Jewish girl in the Carpathian

Mountains. Help students find this mountain range in Eastern Europe to establish a physical setting. The story contains very strong Jewish themes, particularly dealing with the prophet Elijah. If you feel it is appropriate for your classroom, you may wish to do some research into Elijah and his role in the Jewish festival of Passover.

WHILE VIEWING

Ask students if they can try to guess when this story takes place. Many cues should tell them this is not a modern-day story.

Students will hear Yakov, the water carrier, and Raya, the wealthy haymaker, called *Reb* Yakov and *Reb* Raya. Ask if they can guess what the word *Reb* might mean.

Before viewing Gittel’s attempt to complete the final task—creating a silver Elijah’s cup for Passover out of nothing but a silver coin—ask students if they might be able to predict what will happen.

AFTER VIEWING

- “Words, once spoken, are like little dybbuks . . . they dance around. They cause all kinds of trouble!” Have students consider the times they may have boasted about something, or started or heard a rumor that ended up causing trouble.
- Have students research the customs, culture, and traditions of a foreign country, and compare them with their own. With the help of the librarian, find children’s fiction to assist their research.
- Invite guests into the classroom to share firsthand knowledge about traditions, cultures, and customs from foreign lands.

VOCABULARY

ruble	dybbuk	shtetl
matzoh	Passover	seder

RELATED WEB SITES

LIST OF YIDDISH WORDS AND EXPRESSIONS

<http://www.pass.to/glossary/gloz3.htm>

A fairly extensive glossary of Yiddish words, phrases, and terms.

VENN DIAGRAM HOME PAGE

<http://www.venndiagram.com/>

Older middle school students may, using information gathered in their after-viewing activities, go online to create a Venn diagram showing similarities and differences in comparative cultures. Students may need assistance in using this site.

YAHOO! LIGANS: PASSOVER

http://www.yahooligans.com/School_Bell/Social_Studies/Religion/Judaism/Passover/

A directory of age-appropriate Web sites for school-age children about the Jewish festival of Passover.

YAHOO! LIGANS! AROUND THE WORLD

http://www.yahooligans.com/Around_the_World/

A directory of age-appropriate Web sites on foreign lands, traditions, languages, customs, and more.

THE EMMA GOLDMAN PAPERS: A MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM

<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/goldman/curricula/>

Emma Goldman (1869–1940) stands as a major figure in the history of American radicalism and feminism. An influential and well-known anarchist of her day, Goldman was an early advocate of free speech, birth control, women's equality and independence, union organization, and the eight-hour workday. This Web site contains a fully developed curriculum at the middle and high school level.

TALES OF WONDER: FOLK AND FAIRY TALES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

<http://members.xoom.com/darsie/tales/index.html>

The stories in this collection represent a small sampling of the rich storytelling art that is the common heritage of humanity. Stories from many parts of the world are included here.

THE READING CORNER

<http://ccpl.carr.lib.md.us/read/>

A source for kids to find newly published works and to check into older classics.