Read the PJ Library Book

It Could Always Be Worse (4s)
Written and Illustrated by Margot Zemach
Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Synopsis
This is an award-winning retelling of a delightful Yiddish folktale, in which a poor man is no longer able to tolerate his noisy and crowded home. He consults the local rabbi for help. To the man’s surprise, the rabbi instructs him to bring more and more of his farm animals into the house. The ensuing chaos helps teach the man some important lessons about gratitude and learning to appreciate what one has.

Discuss the Jewish values and vocabulary with one another

Being happy with what you have / Sa-me-ach be-chel-ko / שמח בַּחֵלֶק
Storytelling (tradition) - Me-so-rah - מְסוֹרָה

Introducing the value of being happy with what you have
Same’ach b’chelko

From Jewish teachings
“Who is rich? The one who is happy with what one has” (Pirkei Avot 4:1). Ben Zoma, the author of this maxim, believes that the key to leading a rich, fulfilling life lies in focusing on the positive. To strengthen gratitude skills, Rabbi Meir suggests that individuals try to offer up 100 different blessings or words of thanks each day (Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 43b).

For the teacher
- How do you express appreciation for what you have?
- As you encourage children to acknowledge their blessings, how can you help them move beyond thinking about their toys and possessions to focusing on the non-materialistic aspects of life?
- How can we minimize kids’ desire to have what everyone else has?

Questions for children
- Why was the man unhappy at the beginning of the story?
- How did the man feel at the end of the story? What changed?
- Sometimes it’s important to pause and think about all the good things that we have.
- In addition to saying thanks for food and holidays, like the brachot we say at snack time and before Shabbat, what else might you want to say thanks for?
Imagine your community living these Jewish values.

How would your classroom change?
How will families be involved?

In the Classroom / Centers

✓ Sameach b’chelko/being happy with what you have: Teach your class the blessing that is recited upon seeing a wonder of nature: Baruch ata Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha’olam, oseh maasei v’reishit. Go on an outdoor nature walk, and direct the children to look out for opportunities to recite this blessing. Bring along a camera to snap photos of all the wonders that you find.

✓ Sameach b’chelko/being happy with what you have: Challenge children to classify classroom objects based on their purpose. For example, tables hold stuff, lights help us see, and sponges clean things. Ask each child to dictate a note acknowledging one item’s usefulness for the job it does. Collate the notes into a book for your literacy or engineering center.

✓ Mesorah/storytelling: To help children understand how folktales change with each telling, play “telephone” at game time. Begin with a one sentence story, such as “The fat black cat chased the little gray mouse into a hole.” As the children whisper or say the story aloud to one another, keep track of when changes are introduced. Ask the children how the changes add to the story.

✓ Mesorah/storytelling: In your writing/art center ask children to draw a picture as you read this story. When the pictures have been completed, ask children to tell a new story based on their friend’s drawing. If appropriate, allow students to act out the stories as part of a dramatic arts activity.
Bridging Home and School
Make gratitude a habit
Place a table outside your classroom door and stock it with note paper, pencils, and a shoe box with a slit. Post a note explaining that in order to practice gratitude, you’d like to begin each day by having families jot down one or more good things that have happened to them since yesterday.

Host a storytelling dinner
In preparation for the dinner, have the children prepare some classic story-related foods. Good examples include Bone Button Borscht, Latkes, Latkes, Good to Eat, Once Upon a Shabbos, or one of many secular books that mention food. At the dinner, ask families to work in small groups retelling the stories that inspired the food. Add to the fun by drawing props out of a bag and incorporating these items into the story.

Family Engagement at Home
One more time
Every family has a relative or friend who tells great stories. Call or invite that special person and ask for your favorite story or maybe a new one. Share your family stories with them, too.

Share your stories and experiences with everyone.
What happened?
How can the learning go deeper?
Tell us a story... about storytelling in your classroom
Try writing up your classroom events as a story to retell with your students. For example:
Once upon a time, a happy teddy bear named Goldie lived in the Kochavim classroom. One day, the children noticed that Goldie was looking very raggedy. The children began to worry that perhaps Goldie was sad. Remembering how her grandmother had helped her sick stuffed doggie, Mitzi asked if Goldie could spend a few days at her grandmother’s house. Mitzi’s grandmother did a little sewing here and a little snipping there, and soon Goldie was as good as new.

More resources and websites for inspiration
Nurturing gratitude in children
Who is rich: the tool for being happy right now
http://www.simpletoremember.com/articles/a/pirkei-avos-who-is-rich/
Gratitude/hakarat hatov
http://jewishvalueseveryday.blogspot.com/search/label/gratitude