



# JOSEPH HAD A LITTLE OVERCOAT

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Illustrated by Simms Taback

*In this beloved Jewish folktale, Joseph's old and tattered coat is recycled and takes the form of increasingly smaller articles of clothing.*

Folktales play a central role in Jewish literature. Many take place in Eastern European Jewish *shtetls* (villages). *Joseph Had a Little Overcoat* is a folktale that gives honor to the tradition of folktales! On various pages there are references to Chelm, (an imaginary *shtetl* which is the setting for many folktales); Tevye (the protagonist of Shalom Aleichem's story upon which *Fiddler on the Roof* was based); and the great Yiddish writer, I. L. Peretz. Look to the end of the book for the Yiddish folk song that Taback used as the basis for this story.

## BAL TASHCHIT

A core Jewish value is that of *Bal Tashchit*: an injunction against needless destruction and a commandment to preserve the earth. Although Judaism is an ancient religion, its laws which guide us to live in an environmentally responsible way are perhaps more significant today than ever before. The Talmud (Jewish teachings) says: "Whoever destroys anything that could be useful to others breaks the law of *Bal Tashchit*" (Kadoshim 32a). When Taback wrote: "and there's a moral, too!" on the title page, he was referring to this Jewish teaching.

## USING THIS BOOK AT HOME

After a first reading, close the book and ask your children if they can recall all of the things Joseph was able to make with his overcoat. Then try to recall all the places Joseph went,

such as the fair and the wedding and which article of clothing was important in each of these locations.

For the more creative and adventuresome, on index cards draw pictures of each article of clothing Joseph made. On other cards draw each activity that he participated in. Then use the index cards to play a "Memory" game where you place the cards facedown and try to pick matches. This is more difficult than traditional "Memory" because you must match the clothing with the activity (i.e. the bow tie with drinking tea!)

One of the things that makes this story so charming is the die-cuts that illustrate each page. Draw some pictures with your children, layer one on top of the other, and experiment with changing the drawings by cutting shapes out of the top picture.

Go through your children's wardrobe together. Select some clothing that either no longer fits or is too "old and worn" to be used anymore. Think of some ways those clothes can be used. Perhaps the fabric can be cut and sewn into clothing for a favorite stuffed animal, a patch on another pair of pants, or a rag to wash the windows. If it is still in good condition, donating them is also practicing *Bal Tashchit*!

Look through other belongings. Can your children help you think of creative uses of them? Old socks make great hand puppets. Paper towel rolls can be telescopes, rain sticks, and flutes. Pj