



# The Hungry Clothes and Other Jewish Folktales

written by  
**Peninnah Schram**

illustrated by  
**Gianni De Conno**

{ Why do we tell stories? }

## HANDS ON!

### Put on a Play

Many of the folktales in *The Hungry Clothes* started out as stories in oral tradition: they were told out loud to an audience. In that spirit, act out some of these stories for your family and friends.

Pick your favorite tale in the collection and assign parts to people in your family. (You can even make up a special part called “The Narrator.”) Then head to your dress-up bin or closet to find some costumes – creating a good disguise is especially important for tricksters like Hershele! Perform the story any way you like, imagining yourself in a distant place and time.

You could even try filming your story performance and sharing with grandparents, friends, or teachers. Afterwards, ask your audience what it was like to hear the story out loud – just the way the stories were originally shared.

### Tricky Tricksters

Tricksters are common in folktales around the world. In Jewish culture, two famous examples are Hershele of Ostropol (a town in Ukraine), and Joha, who is popular in Sephardic (Spanish and Middle Eastern Jewish) tales. Often the trickster is very poor and has to rely on his instincts just to survive another day. Hungry Hershele uses tricks to teach lessons about the importance of tzedakah (Hebrew for “justice” or charitable giving) and hachnasat orchim (Hebrew for “welcoming guests”). In one story, Hershele teaches a rich host that it is not right to refuse him a place at the table just because he is dressed in rags. A more elaborate trick is necessary to show a stingy shopkeeper the value of sharing with the poor. These tales emphasize the importance of giving generously to others, a central value in Judaism. To learn more, visit [pjlibrary.org/hungryclothes](http://pjlibrary.org/hungryclothes).

### Matching Wits

Several of these stories give us a window into the personality of King Solomon, the ancient leader of Israel. In one story, Solomon tries to play a trick on his friend Benaiah to get back at him for beating him at chess – it turns out that the wise king is also quite competitive! In another, he wishes for “an understanding heart so that I may be wise in my judgments and truly listen to the people.” These stories also highlight the wisdom that women have contributed to Jewish tradition over time. We meet Hannah the Storyteller, who is famous in her town for her problem-solving abilities; in another tale, we encounter a young woman who can outwit a powerful king. Solomon is not the only one whose insights are worthy of a fabulous folktale.

### Doing What’s Right

The author of this collection, Peninnah Schram, says justice is “the most prized of all Jewish goals.” Again and again, the characters in these stories are rewarded for giving generously and treating others kindly – in other words, doing the right thing! The tales together paint a picture of a moral universe where those who have good intentions and treat others honestly will reap the rewards that they deserve. These values are timeless and applicable wherever Jews live – from Jerusalem to Marrakesh, Ostropol, America, and everywhere in between.

## TALK IT OVER WITH YOUR KIDS

**IN** “The Boy Who Prayed with the Alphabet,” why does the congregation join the boy in praying with letters instead of words?

**WHY** do you think characters such as Yankel fall for tricks, like believing Hershele’s claim that the large spoon had a baby spoon? Would you fall for that trick?

**WHICH** place would you most like to visit: the village of Helm, King Solomon’s court in Jerusalem, or the Marrakesh bakery? Why?