



GITTEL'S HANDS

Written by Erica Silverman

Illustrated by Deborah Nourse Lattimore

With her father constantly boasting about her talents, a young girl named Gittel is asked to perform impossible tasks. She must embroider a matzo cover without a needle and create an Elijah's cup from a silver coin. Just as all seems hopeless, Gittel is rewarded for her kind ways and gentle nature by none other than the prophet Elijah.

JEWISH CONCEPTS

Gittel's father knows the pride that parents naturally feel for their beloved children. Yakov, however, goes further by boasting and, indeed, lying about his daughter's abilities in order to boost his own standing in the community -- and even clear his debts. Just as in the similar classic story, *Rumpelstiltskin*, Yakov acts without concern for his daughter's feelings, despite her repeated attempts to tell her father about her discomfort. He clearly did not reflect on the concept of *shmirat halashon* (in Hebrew, "guarding one's tongue/speech"), which advises us to consider our words carefully before speaking. It is important, of course, for children to learn that controlling one's behavior -- including speech -- develops over time. As *Gittel's Hands* shows, adults as well as children sometimes find it difficult to say and do the right thing.

The items Gittel creates during the long winter are used during the celebration of Passover, the spring festival commemorating the ancient Israelites' freedom from slavery in Egypt. Each year at the ritual Passover meal, the *seder*, we open the door for the prophet Elijah. In many Jewish folk tales, the prophet comes to the aid of a worthy person in time of need, as he does for Gittel. Jewish tradition teaches that he will return to this world, ushering in a time of peace and freedom.

USING THIS BOOK AT HOME

Consider ways to help your children grow in their ability to control the urge to boast, including asking them to consider how they might feel in the other person's shoes, walking away from the temptation to brag or lie, and that old standby -- counting to 10 before speaking in haste.

Your family might also talk about the following:

- Several times in the book we read that "words once spoken are like little dybbuks (mischievous demons)." What do you think this means? Can words once spoken also be like little *blessings*?
- Why doesn't her father notice when Gittel repeatedly lets him know that his bragging makes her uncomfortable?
- Does Gittel's father learn from his behavior and the trouble it causes? Do you think his changed behavior is permanent?
- Does Gittel do the right thing in standing up to the merchant and, in the end, refusing his offer of work?

Act out Gittel's story. Have children act as the parent and merchant from the story while an adult plays the part of Gittel. Encourage them to do a better job than the father in this story in protecting Gittel and handling his obligations, and to improve the way the merchant treats someone who owes him a debt.

