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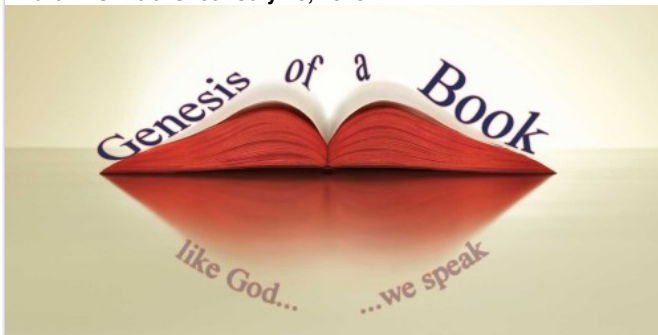
## PERSPECTIVE

Exploring the Jewish Background to the Life and Words of Jesus

## How a Book is Born: *Teach it To Your Children: How Kids Lived in Bible Days*

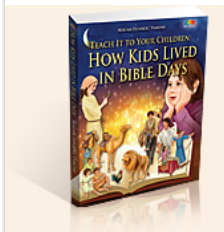
Miriam Feinberg Vamosh

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Stories? Me? Write stories? That was my gut response when the scientific adviser for my book *Teach it to Your Children: How Kids Lived in Bible Days*, made one of his first suggestions to me, because until then, my specialty was non-fiction—informing readers how people lived in Bible times.

The book has plenty such information in the “Did You Know” sections of each chapter. But it’s the short stories in each chapter of *Teach it To Your Children: How Kids Lived in Bible Days* that I start out with as I attempt to rise to David Bivin’s welcome challenge to describe the “genesis” of this book. One of my favorite stories was inspired by my scientific adviser, Prof. Meir Bar-Ilan. In fact, I’d like to tell you about him first because he embodies so much of what makes this book a special combination of inspirations from the Holy Land itself. He is a professor of Talmud and Jewish history at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, which carries the name of his own grandfather. He is a disabled veteran, having lost a leg in Israel’s first war in Lebanon. And so not by chance, as we discussed the chapters the book should contain, Prof. Bar-Ilan suggested there be one about how the Bible treats people with disabilities. This struck very close to home, as my husband is also a disabled Israeli veteran. He led me back into 2 Samuel where I rediscovered the story of a young man, disabled as a toddler, who overcame both physical and political adversity to rise to new heights—Mephibosheth. Most people hardly remember who he is (2 Sam. 4:4; 2 Sam. 9), much less can pronounce his name. And so, telling children his story, I was able to give him a voice, and at the same time introduce children to one of the Bible’s most important injunctions—care for the needy and the weak, as God does.



How Kids Lived In Bible Days by  
Miriam Feinberg Vamosh

Inspiration for another story came from my educational adviser, Maya Dubinsky, an expert in early childhood Jewish education (full disclosure, she is also my daughter). One of my stories takes place in an ancient classroom from around the time of Jesus, where I wanted to show what schooling was like in those days, and appears in my chapter on education. I asked Maya what the most amazing thing was that a child ever said to her in the classroom. She answered, without hesitation, that it was when she was discussing with them in what ways they thought human beings are made in God’s image, as we are taught in Genesis. The answer of one of her young students went right into the mouth of the young boy living in Jesus’ day in my story: “we are like God because we speak, and so does God.”

Yet another story, in the chapter on worship in Bible days, came from my own childhood, in fact, the very first lesson I ever learned in Sunday school. It is such a powerful and well-known tale in Jewish tradition that many people think it's right in the Bible. But it's not—it was a story the ancient Jewish sages told to explain how father Abraham, as a youngster, came to his faith in one God. It's a strange, wonderful tale of Abraham working in the “idol shop” owned by his father Terah.

The other special element of the book is the arts and crafts section that goes with each chapter. That goes back to the very first conversation I had with the publisher, Avi Ofra of Avi Media. “I want a book for children, and about children. A book that grandparents, parents, aunts and uncles can read together with the kids they love. And I want activities, too,” he said. We realized that this element, together with the fictional story for each chapter, would take this book beyond any other. Putting historical and biblical facts together with pictures of various finds is quite a common element in daily life books about Bible times and other historical times; *Teach it to Your Children* does that, too. But actually being able to sit with your child, grandchild, niece, nephew or Sunday School class, and make a manger, for example, that looks like the one Jesus was put in as an infant—well, there's nothing like it for teaching, learning and growing together in love of Scripture.

The activities became an opportunity not only for biblically inspired coloring, painting, drawing and writing, but also a chance to let children elsewhere in the world know what Israeli children do in their classroom. For example—how to make a charity box, with a photograph of real little girls in a Tel Aviv classroom with some of their creations. Another activity shows you how to make a model spring—water being one of the Bible's most enduring symbols—the way elementary schoolchildren in Israel learn to do. The making of a manger came out of the fact that as a tour educator, I show people at Megiddo (Armageddon) a stone manger—the same kind the baby Jesus would have been laid in. “You see?” I tell pilgrims. “Mangers were not made out of wood like they usually are in your nativity scenes back home. They were stone. So next year, have your Sunday school classes make a manger out of papier-maché!” And that's exactly what I did. Over about five weeks, as the layers of plaster and newspaper dried thoroughly over an old shoebox, and with some craft-store straw, quite a presentable manger emerged. The photo, and instructions, are in the book.

People often ask how I do my research. One thing's for sure: I've come a long way since collecting material for my first book about daily life at the time of Jesus and those that followed. I remember summer days where I took one library book at a time to the pool at Kibbutz Ma'aleh Hahamishah near my home. Those were my strange-but-true first steps into the world of ancient customs. As my two daughters—never mind how long ago but they are now a business woman and an educator—splashed around with their friends, I would troll the book for information, copying notes longhand into a notebook. Then the notebooks (and there were many) would slowly but surely coalesce into chapters at home in my study.

By the time I wrote *Teach it to Your Children*, I had upgraded my technology—no more longhand copying into notebooks (and no more poolside research)—but the library still played a vital role. After the publisher gave me his wish-list of subjects to include, Prof. Bar-Ilan went over it and added his ideas. Then he gave me a long list of books to read. And so it was off to libraries at Tel Aviv University and at Hebrew University to find and study them. If you're wondering about your own research, I'll add that Internet searches can play a role, but mainly to come up with new sources to look into back in the library, as well as, in my case, to find experts in the many and varied fields I tackled. For instance, it was on the Internet that I found Prof. Leslie Joan Shumka, who had written her M.A. thesis years before on toys in the Roman world. She was pleasantly surprised by my query, and was warmly obliging when I emailed her “cold.” She sent me her entire thesis, which was an invaluable resource in my chapter on toys and games. There were many such ad-hoc advisers.

Eventually, with much help from a team that included, prominently, the book's designer (as much as text is my forte, I recognize the old adage is more true than ever—a picture is worth a thousand words), the book came together. After much polishing by Margery Morgan, the text editor, the text was ready. Prof. Bar-Ilan went over each element of each chapter with a fine-tooth comb, picking out the inaccuracies, sometimes again and again until he was satisfied that readers and young listeners were getting a true picture of the lives of children in the Bible. After that, came the input of Sharon Hopkins, an early childhood Christian educator and pastor's wife from Oregon, who read each chapter through the prism of her faith and the eyes (and language skills) of the children she teaches. As a Jewish person, I've tried for years in my writing and guiding to respectfully show Christians how the best of Jewish tradition impacts their own faith and customs. But Sharon's input made all the difference in making sure that every word was written so as to deepen Christian children's understanding of Scripture and the experience of sharing it with the adults who love them to strengthen family bonds.

And speaking of family, one of the best aspects of working with the publisher Avi Ofra is that his very own family embodied the love, devotion, care and respect in family bonds to which the Bible teaches us to aspire. His son and daughter helped him in many aspects of the marketing and the book's first edition was dedicated to his first grandchild. The family of the graphic artist, Saggie Bernstein, was also involved—it's his son whom he photographed using “David's slingshot.” And the illustrative artist, Mira Hass, says her children are a constant inspiration for her to tell Bible stories in pictures.

Scholars tell us that the word “genesis,” coming via Latin from a Greek term, is related to being born. I hope that I have been able to clue you not only to how *Teach it to Your Children* was born, but perhaps, on a deeper level, how the collective effort of the group of people behind and alongside me gave birth to a book that I hope is an inspiration to growing faith in Scripture of children and their families everywhere.

**Miriam Feinberg Vamosh**

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