

Abstract values are hard to teach. It has been said that values are "caught, not taught." Enthusiasm for God's Word is more likely to be "caught" during joyous celebrations of the Word than from a classroom lesson.

Jewish feasts, besides being celebrations, are also occasions for transmitting values. Since Jesus celebrated these feasts, it is not inappropriate that we adapt aspects of them for our own celebrations. Most Jewish festivals celebrate some historical event, but Simchat Torah is simply a joyous expression of gratitude for God's Word in Scripture, particularly in the Torah or books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).

Simchat Torah usually comes in October early every year. It provides an opportunity to celebrate God's Word with your students. You can use aspects of this festive celebration to convey the valuing of God's Word.

The Jewish celebration

Portions of the Torah are read weekly, so in a year's time, the entire Torah is read. On Simchat Torah, Deuteronomy is finished, and immediately, the reading of the Torah, starts over with Genesis. Thus, the reading of the Torah is cyclic, or "circular," having no beginning or end, as God has no beginning or end. To signify this, the Torah scrolls are carried around the sanctuary, in seven "circuits" or circles. Children carry

Simchat Torah banners and small "Torahs" or scrolls. Joyful singing and dancing accompanies and follows each circuit, and groups come up to read Torah blessings. Children do the last, and when they finish, they receive candy or sweets as a wish for a sweet year. Some levity is allowed so the participants may experience genuine enjoyment of the celebration. Even secular music, which is not usually permitted, is allowed.

Appreciating God's Word

To lead children to value God's Word, start at the beginning of the school year by having a table where the Bible is enthroned, perhaps flanked by candles or flowers. Teach that words are part of who a person is, so we respect all books, but especially the Bible, for it contains God's Word. At all times, give the example of treating God's Word with great reverence.

Brainstorm with the students about what God tells us in Scripture. Help them recall things we wouldn't know without Scripture: God is good (seen in God's dealings with the chosen people); God created a world with everything we need; God loves us and gave us commandments to protect us and help us be our best selves. This may require some discussion, as commandments are often seen simply as prohibitions, but what would society be like without them? What if there was no commandment against stealing, for example? Would anything be safe? Would there be any way of stopping those who didn't respect people's possessions and care for creation? Each commandment has a positive side, which is for our protection, growth, and happiness.

God also speaks to us Christians

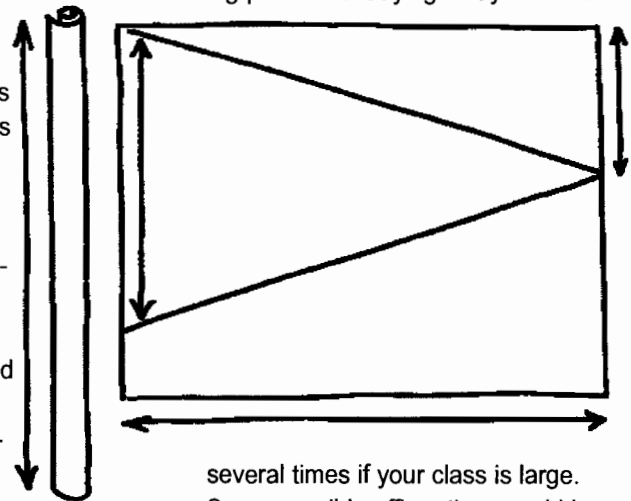
in the New Testament. In these Christian Scriptures, Jesus teaches us how to live, how to treat one another, how to be happy. And God teaches us that he is with us and wants us with him forever. As you discuss these ideas, express/ elicit gratitude for what God has told us.

Preparing for the celebration

Describe the Simchat Torah festivities, emphasizing joy and exuberance in celebrating. If the children have begun to "catch" enthusiasm for God's word, perhaps a child will suggest having a celebration before you even mention it!

For paper banners to carry in the procession or "parade," have each child tightly roll up a sheet of paper lengthwise (for the stick), and secure it with paste and tape. For the "flag" part, give each child a triangular piece of paper, the full length of a sheet of paper, with its base 7 inches wide. Have them decorate it using the theme of God's Word: perhaps a Bible, a cloud with rays (God "speaking"), or anything from Scripture. Paste and tape finished banners securely to the paper "sticks."

Prepare a "scroll" for each child beforehand, using seven affirming sayings based on Scripture, one saying per sheet. Sayings may be used



several times if your class is large. Some possible affirmations could be:

1. (Child's name), you are precious to me.
2. (Child's name), before you were born, I knew your name.

3. (Child's name), you are my precious child.

4. (Child's name), you are my beloved child, in whom I delight.

5. (Child's name), before you were born, you were mine.

6. (Child's name), before you were born, I knew you and loved you.

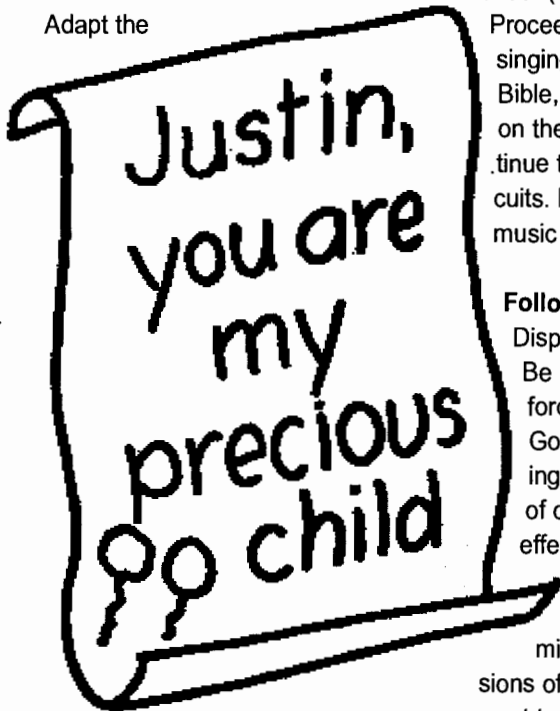
7. (Child's name), you are special to me.

Turn each paper over and write the child's name and the number of the passage on a corner. Roll the paper so the name and number show, and tie the "scroll" with yarn.

Have candy or sweets to give the children after reading their scrolls. Volunteers might bring cupcakes for a treat afterwards. If possible, inquire at a synagogue about appropriate joyful music, or use your students' favorite happy songs.

The celebration

Adapt the



following in a way that will work for your class. Have the children arrange themselves as in a parade, carrying their scrolls and banners. With the enthroned Bible in the center, lead the parade around the room in a circle, with singing or happy music, banner waving, and, if it feels right, dancing

or skipping. If possible, have the celebration outdoors, to permit greater merriment. After circling once or twice, announce that you will read the last verses of the Torah. Read Deuteronomy 34:10 to the end.

Mention that God's Word has no end, like a circle, and now you will read the first verse in the Bible. Read the first few verses of Genesis. After each reading, the children could respond with applause, or banner waving.

For the seven circuits, lead the singing, banner waving parade in a circle again. After the first circuit, children with #1 on their scrolls come to the center, open and read their scrolls. If they are not yet readers, have them repeat their "readings" after you. Give each a sweet, saying, "May God's Word be sweet for you." The class can respond, "May your year be sweet," and/or applaud and cheer (e.g., "Thank you, God!").

Proceed with the second circuit, singing and parading around the Bible, then have the children with #2 on their scrolls come forward; continue this pattern for all seven circuits. End with applause. Play happy music and pass out cupcakes.

Following up

Display the banners and scrolls. Be alert to opportunities to reinforce gratitude and respect for God's Word. Extend it to respecting the spoken and written words of others. This is probably most effective if you can elicit the ideas from the children. Some ideas to elicit and reinforce might be: our words are expressions of ourselves, so we and others want to be listened to; we want our written work treated respectfully; authors share their ideas so we treat books with respect; when others speak, we show respect by listening attentively.

In teaching, remember that values are "caught" more than taught, so devise ways for students to experience values in positive, even joyous,

ways.

Later in the year, another celebration could be held, perhaps inviting older students, with simplified verses from Genesis on the scrolls.

Genesis 1:5

Genesis 1:6-8

Genesis 1:9-13

Genesis 1:14-19

Genesis 1:20-23

Genesis 1:24-27, 31

Genesis 2:1-3

Possible response: "And it was morning and evening the first day" (and applause). Continue with "second day," etc.

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