

## Saying Yes, And: Using Improv in Jewish Educational Settings

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Improv and theater games are a wonderful way to infuse playfulness into any setting. However, they can also be powerfully utilized in Jewish setting to create a sense of community and belonging among learners. Below are some suggestions for activities that can be adapted for grades K-8 and some big ideas to help educators develop their own games.

### **1. Warming Up:**

Every class should begin with a warm-up. In early stages of the group (or a one-time workshop), this should be a name game. In more advanced groups, this should be a check-in game. Note that this is a change for students to warm up to being in the space with each other, so while a specific topic (like a holiday) can be part of the warm-up, the primary purpose should be connection. More than one game can be played.

#### **1. My name is...**

Standing in a circle, each group member introduces herself by name, stating “my name is \_\_\_\_\_, and I like to \_\_\_\_\_.” The activity is accompanied by a gesture. Ex: My name is Ella, and I like to sing (With the gesture of holding a microphone). All group members repeat: “That’s Ella, and she likes to sing” + gesture.

*The game allows us to know each other’s names, and begin to make connections by discovering people’s interests.*

#### **2. The Big Wind Blows**

Everyone sits in a circle, with one chair fewer than the number of members (like musical chairs). One person (the facilitator) stands in the middle and says “the big wind blows for anyone who \_\_\_\_\_.” Anyone to whom the statement applies, gets up and switches seats. The person left without a seat makes the next statement.

Big Wind Blows can be played at any age, and at any group stage and level- it requires adaptation of the statements. For a group of teenagers who don’t know each other, start slow- “The Big Wind Blows for anyone who is tired today”, and work up to more personal or mood driven statements- “The Big Wind Blows for anyone who felt out of place this week”. *This game can teach us where the group is at, how people are feeling, while also allowing people to start getting to know each other, as they find common ground.*

3. Other possible warm-up/name games:

- Throwing a ball/socks/soft object from one person to another, saying the name of the person you’re throwing to.
- Social Barometer: Each person describes their mood using weather terms. “I’m feeling cloudy

with a chance of thunderstorm”.

## **2. Focusing Up:**

Focus games are used to bring the group in and prepare for the learning (the bulk of the class). These are often an extension of the warm-up section, and most games in this category can be used as warm-ups for a more experienced group.

### **1. And Then**

All members sit in a circle and tell a story together. The first person begins with “once upon a time” and sets up the story. The next person says “yes, and...” (or, to infuse Hebrew, “Ve’Az” and continues the story with another sentence, and so on.

*This can be made easier or harder depending on age. Younger kids may need more facilitation for stories to flow. This is a great way to learn about story structure, bring up new themes in class, or incorporate Hebrew vocabulary.*

### **2. Zip, Zap, Zop**

In a circle, players send energy to one another by clapping in the direction of someone in the circle and saying “zip”, then “zap”, then “zop”, and back again. If a player gets the order wrong, they are out, and the circle gets smaller.

*This requires a high level of concentration, noticing where the “zip” is and paying attention to what was said last. For more advanced students, start a second cycle mid-way through the game, or increase the speed. When participants are familiar with the basic game, this can be a good place to introduce Jewish vocabulary, or practice verb conjugations, e.g- “Halach, Holech, Yelech”.*

### **3. Other focus up games:**

- Cup: players stand in a circle and try to keep a cup (or whiffle ball) in the air while passing it from one to the other. Try to count, say the Aleph Bet, recite a prayer or tell a story.
- Pass the Energy: One person makes a gesture and a sound, which is repeated and augmented by everyone else in the circle, until it is morphed into something else. The energy must be kept high. This is especially good for transitioning lower-energy groups into independent work in small groups.
- What Are You Doing? One player begins miming an activity, and the next in line asks “what are you doing?” While still performing the activity, the first player must name another activity, for the next player in line to perform. Ex: (while pretending to brush teeth) “What are you doing?” I’m picking strawberries! Next player picks strawberries. (For younger learners, have activities ready, charades style).

## **3. Palette Cleansers:**

Palette cleaners should be used in case the class has been sitting for long, or doing a very cerebral activity. They can also be good in cases of tension in the group of intense discussion. A Palette cleanser may not always be needed in every class, but they are a good tool to have in your pocket.

## **1. Imaginair**

Imaginair can be very fun and silly for some kids, or very hard work for others. Either way, it is physical, and is helpful in getting students into a playful space. Players walk around the room, and the facilitator changes the environment, and everyone reacts physically. Ex: We are walking around, and all of a sudden, it's freezing cold! It's snowing! We can't see! After a few moments, we return to "normal" walking around, and change to a new environment.

*It is best for the facilitator to participate and model this behavior. For more advanced players, the "environment" can be swapped for a scenario. Ex: We are walking around, and all of a sudden, we see someone we really don't like.*

## **2. Other possible Palette cleansers:**

- Freeze Dance: A big favorite for kids everywhere. Everyone dances, and when the music stops, everyone must freeze. Can also be played with one student as the DJ- helps with students who don't like dancing.

- Number walking: 1 is the slowest walking pace. 5 (or 7, or 10) is the fastest. The facilitator shouts out numbers and everyone has to walk accordingly. This can also be done in Hebrew.

## ***4. Improv:***

Improv promotes thinking on your feet, being creative, flexible and present. 3 rules of improv:

**Always say yes!**

**Don't ask questions!**

**Listen!**

Improv might be used in the classroom to explore a new subject, but it also a great tool for forming group dynamic and a culture of active listening and participation.

## **Some beloved improv games:**

- Any game from "Who's Line is it Anyway?" works great. Speaking according to the alphabet, drawing styles for a scene from a hat, etc.

- Freeze: 2 players begin a scene, and establish a who, what, and where. A player yells "freeze!", assumes the exact physical position of one of the actors, and begins a new scene based on it. This can be a fun way to explore Holidays, Minhagim or the different ways we can and cannot behave in the classroom.

- Translator: 3 players sit in chairs. One speaks only a gibberish language, one only English, and one is a translator. the 3 must communicate through the translator, who must understand the gibberish using gestures and body language.

- The Herald: the facilitator (or a volunteer) tells a story, while all other participants are on the “stage”. Participants are welcome at any time to begin acting out pieces of the story as they see fit. This can be a great way to explore text-study.

### ***5. Cooling Down/Circling Up***

Ending a class can either be with a physical or mental cool down, or with a reflection (circle up). Sometimes, we do both.

#### **1. Magic Light**

Everyone walks around the room. The facilitator asks them to imagine a ball of light, shining warm light right at their crown. The light slowly descends throughout the body until the whole body is loose and relaxed.

*This can also be done lying down, for more physical classes. It is important to maintain a low voice and a relaxing tone. Sometimes, dimming the lights is appropriate.*

#### **2. Other cool-down games:**

- Shake it: Shaking every part of the body, starting at the top and adding on, until the whole body is shaking. This is good if a class is emotionally intense, or group dynamics got out of hand.
- Leave it in the box: Each student names one thing that came up during class. This can be themes, names, ideas, etc. Everyone picks up the idea and places it in an imaginary box, which we then “lock”. The “box” can also be used a tool in the next session, if we want to return to a question or thought a student had.