



Introducing the IEATA August 2022 Member Spotlight:

Merav Berger

Biography



With a background in theatre, therapy, and education, Merav is committed to advocating for community connection through creative expression. She received her BFA in Acting from Boston University, her MA in Expressive Arts Therapies and Mental Health Counseling specializing in Psychodrama from Lesley University, and her PhD in Expressive Arts Therapies focusing on Expressive Arts-based Jewish Education, also from Lesley University.

After several years of working with the Israeli foster care system and a long-term care unit at a public hospital, Dr. Berger moved to the United States and shifted her focus from therapy to pedagogy, adapting psychodrama and expressive arts methods and activities to support a healthy, curious, and supportive learning environment for students of all ages. It was this work that led to

her first publication and to her doctoral studies, where she explored expressive arts therapy-based methodologies as pedagogy, specifically, supporting educators through expressive arts-based professional development.

Today, she is an expressive arts-based Jewish educator and consultant who supports teachers in cultivating creative and person-centered classrooms, offers leadership development for Jewish youth and teens, and facilitates enrichment programs for families, teens, and youth in synagogues, preschools, and Jewish day schools.

In addition to her work in Jewish education, Dr. Berger also works with telehealth practitioners and secular educators to enhance and promote creative online and in-person connections in their work.

Merav was the 2022 IEATA Conference chair and sits on its board of directors as well as on the board of directors for NewCAJE. She volunteers as a chapter advisor for BBYO, mentoring and empowering young Jewish women in the California Bay Area.

A mother of two young adult children, Merav's secret superpower is her ability to connect with animals and her guilty pleasure is bad reality tv.

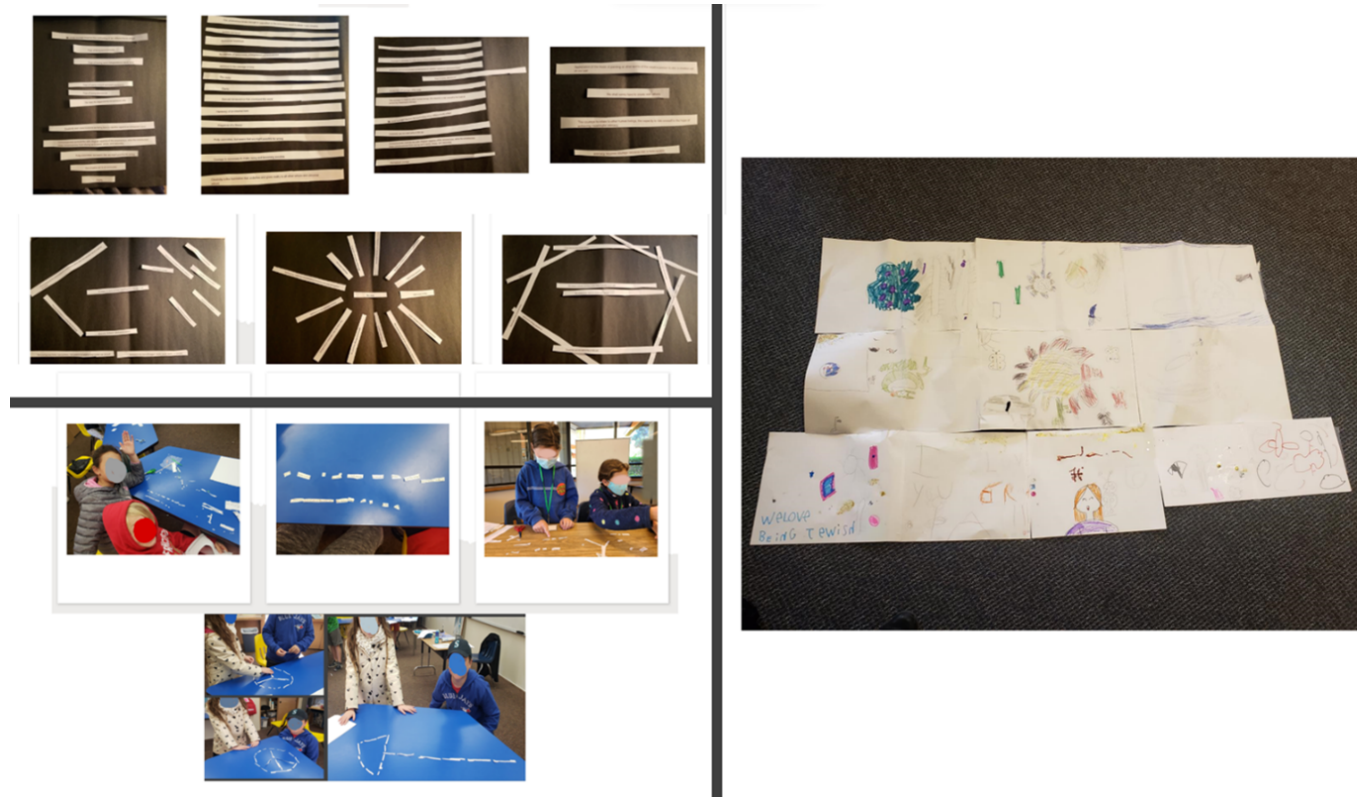


Picture of Merav playing Yenta in Sunnyvale Community Players' Fiddler on the Roof! 2017

What drew you to the field of Expressive Arts?

From a very young age I felt my best self when engaged with a creative process, whether writing, drawing, dancing, or acting - imagining I was something or somewhere or somewhen other somehow made me feel like my whole self. As I got older, I discovered that there was art within art. It occurred to me that a doodle I scribbled might have something to say so I'd write it, and when I'd read what I'd written, I'd hear sounds and music, and so I'd make those sounds and music, which inevitably led to movement, and then, and then, and then... before I knew it, my doodle became a stratum of creative processes that brought me joy, satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment, a newer understanding of something, and, perhaps best of all, peace. Piecing, layering, and weaving various art forms felt like good jazz music to me, where cacophonies of sound converge to cohesion and things make sense.

I became deeply involved in theater which allowed me to inherently entwine the many branches of art practice, and when I learned as an adult that there was an established path to wellness and healing through art, I knew it was the right road for me. An actor at core, learning to harness and bridge various creative processes with intention and mindfulness helped me channel and focus those mechanisms in a totally different way.



Process of Jewish learning that Merav developed based on an integration of *hevruta* learning, expressive arts therapies, and psychodrama, that Merav calls "*Hevrut-Art*"
Without Masks (2015/2016/2017) / With Masks (2021/2022)

How are you implementing multimodal expressive arts in the domains of therapeutic work, artistic practice, consultation, education, and activism?

I use multimodal expressive arts as pedagogy wherein the therapeutic factors that support a safe environment for exploration are used to foster a learning environment rich with judgement-free discovery and meaning-making. I believe we learn best when doing and layering action explorations with other art modalities allows for more robust opportunities to learn something new or learn something old in a new way. My doctoral dissertation explored expressive arts therapy-based practices as professional development for Jewish educators and the findings suggested that engaging with these creative practices may help promote a better sense of teaching self-efficacy and a heightened sense of awareness of students, which in turn, may play a role in higher student achievement.

I also work with primary school children teaching Judaism through theater and engage in multimodal practices to bring a creative process to that learning. The students are invited to explore their personal connections to the characters, to the stories, and to the Judaic values through an intermodal process that brings them insight to and deeper understanding of those elements. My work with families offers a chance for parents and their children to connect in creative ways that build on their understanding and engagement with Judaism and each other. In that work, I build intermodal sessions that gently guide the families through authentic interactions with the content via multimodal art making. Additionally, I mentor and work with teens, providing them with expressive arts-based leadership training, where they are encouraged to engage in facilitated, interwoven creative practices to help them grow into strong, caring, and contributing citizens of the world.



Collaborative clay and EXA process for teen leadership training. The students begin with sociometric exercises to raise spontaneity, lower anxiety, and to create a sense of group trust and cohesion. (2021/2022)



Teacher professional development session on classroom management focusing on the elements of raising awareness, empathy, and compassion for disruptive or disengaged students. (2018)

How do you envision your work and artistic practice moving forward?

My hope is to bring expressive arts-based Jewish education to the forefront of Judaic pedagogical practices. I want to support educators by providing them with tools and techniques to cultivate creative classrooms based on reciprocity and mutual meaning making. I want to arm teachers with knowledge, awareness, and practice of creative, mindful, and intentional teaching. I want to be in community and help grow communities where folks care about the future. I wish to contribute to the body of research on the field of expressive arts therapies, Jewish education, and teen leadership, and I hope to continue making intermodal art practices available to students of all ages, empowering them through their own personal creative processes to effectively make positive change in the world.

How does being a part of IEATA impact your work in expressive arts?

Being in community with IEATA impacts my work in that I feel inspired by the work being done by others. Learning from and with other EXA practitioners and artists supports my own growth that I can then bring back to my communities. Having a place that understands the relationship and connection of artmaking to meaning-making makes me feel grounded and safe and like I can have freedom to explore the natural and human-made world through art, through community, and through the creative process.



Merav facilitated a year-long group where families learn together in parent-child dyads, exploring Jewish values, traditions, and holidays through expressive arts. (2016)

What are your thoughts on the current role of expressive arts in your region and internationally?

The field of expressive arts seems to be undergoing what in California we call a “super bloom.” In my interactions and communications with IEATA, I am continuously overjoyed at just how much work is being done on a state, national, and international level and am pleasantly surprised as I see more and more folks being drawn to engaging with the world in a creative and multimodal manner. I do still see much room for growth, particularly in education and, more specifically, in Jewish education and would love to see more integrative artmaking work being done by schools, congregations, and other institutions of learning. And although there are many institutions specifically geared towards expressive arts therapies training, I feel like colleges and universities that offer education programs in general could benefit from providing courses based on pedagogical practices of expressive arts therapies. Recently, I’ve begun to feel a sense of competition or “othering” between various organizations, institutions, affiliations, and folks in the field and I hope that as we move forward these varying bodies become less siloed from one another and, in the heart of true ritual, begin working together more to bring creative healing to people around the world. We need not feel proprietary over EXA, rather, I believe the field could grow exponentially if we share our knowledge just as we share our art.



Students learning Hebrew through expressive arts. (2021/2022)

Some additional thoughts and comments for the IEATA community.

I feel blessed, honored, and grateful for the IEATA community and all that it has done for my life and for what it aspires to bring to the world. I feel like I can – and do – make a difference and that brings me solace, especially in light of the knowledge that I am not alone in this endeavor and that I have an entire village standing beside me. So, thank you, IEATA, for being a powerfully positive source of strength in my life.

Contact and Website Information

[Website](#)

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Education

- BFA, Acting from Boston University College of Fine Arts
- MA, Expressive Arts Therapies and Mental Health Counseling (specialization: Psychodrama) from Lesley University (in Poleg, Israel)
- PhD, Expressive Arts Therapies (focus: expressive arts-based professional development for Jewish educators) from Lesley University (in Cambridge, MA)

[Boston University College of Fine Arts](#)

[Lesley University](#)

Publications

- Berger, M. (2019). Spontaneity training with children: Action-based learning. In A. Blatner (Ed.), Action explorations: Using psychodramatic methods in non-therapeutic settings (pp. 133-146). Seattle, WA: Parallax.
- Berger, M. (2020). Havruta with a Twist. The Jewish Educator, Fall 2020/5781.
<https://thejewisheducator.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/havruta-with-a-twist.pdf>

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