



# OLAM YEHUDI

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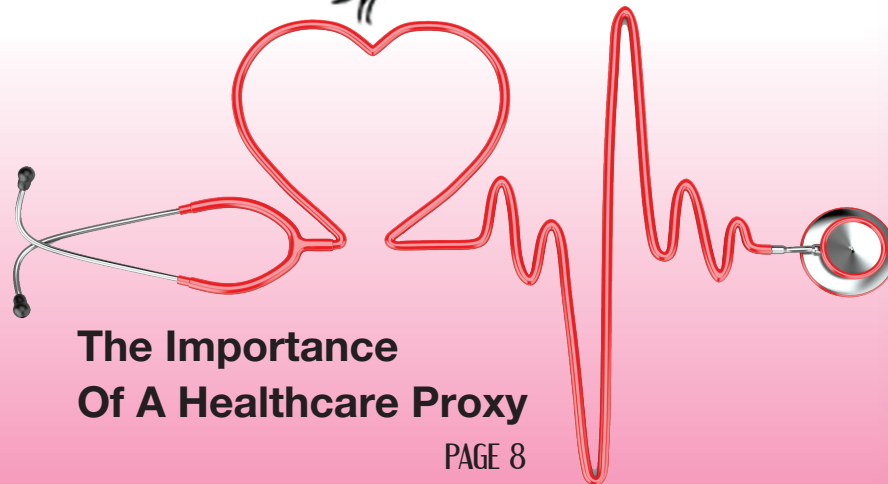
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**What We Can  
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# Dr. Seuss



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## FEATURE



# Olam In the Spotlight

BY HENIA

*It occurred to me that there could be wisdom in a Dr. Seuss book.*



## An Adult Perspective

**W**hen I was a child, I loved when my mother *a"h* would read *The Cat in the Hat* to me. I found it fascinating! Years later, while reading it as an adult, a few lines amid the silliness jumped out at me.

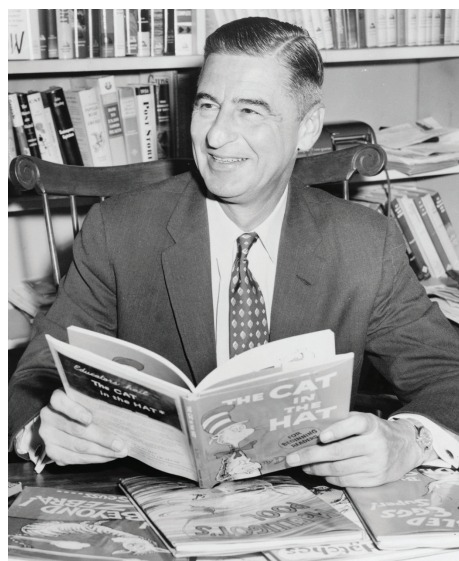
*It's fun to have fun.*

But you have to know how Dr. Seuss was talking to me. As an adult, I had forgotten how to have fun.

Recently, another interpretation occurred to me. It's fun to have fun, but we shouldn't have fun at another person's expense.

I've never heard anyone interpret those lines in a serious way, and I don't know if Dr. Seuss meant anything meaningful by them, but that was the first time it occurred to me that there could be wisdom in a Dr. Seuss book.

And while I took note when Dr. Seuss tells us we must know how to have fun, there's another profound line in *The Cat in the Hat* that I missed. It's at the very end of the story.



In an essay titled "What Would You Do If Your Mother Asked You? A brief introduction to ethics," philosophers Jacob Held and Eric Wilson write:

*"...And there seems to be no overt moral message or quandary in this piece until we get to*

*the end. The book ends with the children's mother returning home and asking what they did all day. A question is then posed to the reader, 'What would you do if your mother asked you?' Would you lie? Mom will never find out..., and no one is harmed in the process. ...But are there other factors that should be considered?" (from the book "Philosophy and Dr. Seuss").*

We adults who grew up on *The Cat in the Hat* have come to realize Theodor (without the "e") Seuss Geisel, known throughout the world as the beloved Dr. Seuss, wasn't just a writer with an imagination who made up silly stories and painted silly pictures.

We now realize Dr. Seuss was a creative genius and brilliant rhymist, and that a number of his seemingly silly books are writings on serious social and moral issues. *Yertle the Turtle* is an allegory on government abusing its power, according to Wikipedia, specifically Hitler. *The Sneetches* is a story about prejudice and unfair social class distinction. *Horton Hears a Who* is about how every person counts. According to Wikipedia this book is about the Hiroshima bombing and the American post-war occupation of Japan. *The Butter Battle Book* is Seuss's criticism of the nuclear arms race between the United States and the former Soviet Union, and *The Lorax* is an urgent call to protect the environment.

These books have us grappling with moral and philosophical dilemmas, and won Dr. Seuss scores of adult fans. In fact, his book *Oh The Places You'll Go* is so full of wisdom for life, it's become a popular graduation gift.

One of my favorite passages in this book is:

*And when you're alone there's a very good chance*

*You'll meet things that scare you right out of your pants.*

One of my favorite Dr. Seuss books



is *The Lorax*. In this book, a character called the *Once-ler*, who lives in a deserted wasteland, tells his story to an unnamed child, about how this once beautiful area was ruined and his business shut down.

When the *Once-ler* came here, he says, it was a "glorious place" with green grass, a pond, clear skies, *Swomee-Swans*, *Brown Bar-ba-loots* [cute bear-like animals], *Humming-Fish*, and *Truffula Trees*.

Upon arrival, the *Once-ler* notices that

*In a last desperate effort to save the environment, the Lorax appeals to the Once-ler – an appeal that tugs at the reader's heartstrings.*





## FEATURE

*Often a story with emotional appeal has  
a greater impact than dry statistics.*

the tufts of the *Truffula Trees* are made of soft material that he could make something from, and sell. He chops down a tree and knits something he calls a *Thneed*.

A creature pops out of the tree-stump, and says,

"I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees.

I speak for the trees for the trees have no tongues..."

The Once-ler explains that he chopped only one tree, and that this thing is a *Thneed*.

"...a Fine-Something That- All- People-Need.

...It's a shirt. It's a sock. It's a glove. It's a hat.

But it has other uses. Yes, far beyond that."

From Dr. Seuss's illustration of the *Thneed*, an irregularly shaped material, and its description that it *can* be used for so many things, we get the idea that the *Thneed* isn't particularly good for anything.

The Lorax tells him nobody would buy such a thing, but then a man comes along and buys one, and the Once-ler says,

"You poor stupid guy!

You never can tell what some people will buy."

Incidentally, I think Dr. Seuss is giving us good business advice here. We never know what people will go for. If you think of a new invention, or a new business idea, don't give up on it because you decide nobody would be interested – not until you do some market research.

The Once-ler calls his relatives to come help him with his get-rich-quick scheme. Business booms, a factory is built, and many *Truffula* trees are cut down. That causes the *Brown-Bar-ba-loots* to starve, so the Lorax sends them away to find food elsewhere.

The Once-ler continues growing his business, and his factory is now polluting

the air and the water.

In a last desperate effort to save the environment, the Lorax appeals to the Once-ler – an appeal that tugs at the reader's heartstrings. The Lorax tells the Once-ler that the *Swomee-Swans* will have to leave due to the air pollution and the *Humming-Fish* will have to leave because of the water pollution.

"My poor *Swomee Swans*...why, they can't sing a note!

No one can sing who has smog in his throat."

The Once-ler insists he has his rights, and says he will continue to grow his business.

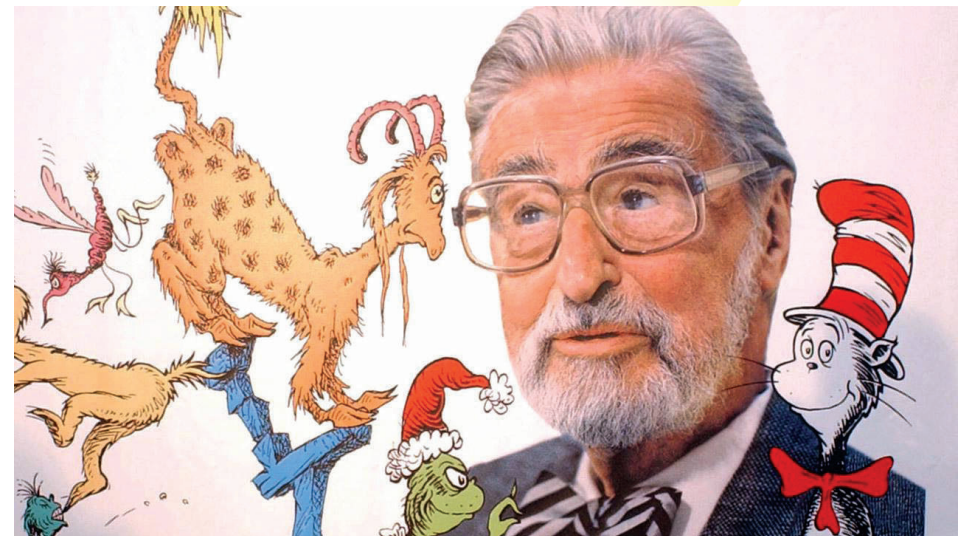
Just then, the last *Truffula Tree* falls. With no more *Truffula Trees*, there is no more business. His relatives leave, and the Once-ler is now alone in this deserted toxic wasteland.

Not surprisingly, *The Lorax* became associated with the environmental movement. Often a story with emotional

appeal has a greater impact than dry statistics. Aside from its obvious wake-up call to protect the environment, *The Lorax* raises some difficult dilemmas: Should business activity be restricted to save the environment? Should our consumption be restricted? For example, the number of paper goods we use. Beyond this, do we have a right to market useless products just because people are willing to buy them?

The Once-ler was shortsighted. He should have realized if he didn't plant more *Truffula Trees* his business wouldn't last. Could the Once-ler have planted enough trees to sustain his business and preserve the environment as well?

Similarly, a number of Dr. Seuss's other books leave us thinking.



**T**heodor Seuss Geisel was born in 1904 in Springfield, Massachusetts. He attended Dartmouth College and was editor-in-chief of Dartmouth's humor magazine *Jack O Lantern*. He was a cartoonist for the *Sunday Evening Post*, and for fifteen years he created advertising campaigns for *Standard Oil*.

During WWII he created over 400 political cartoons for *PM Magazine*, including cartoons protesting Germany's treatment of the Jews.

Dr. Seuss wrote over sixty children's books and they have been translated into more than twenty languages, and sold over 600 million copies. Most of his books were written under the name Dr. Seuss, and these are the books he illustrated himself. He also wrote some other children's books under the pseudonym Theo LeSieg – Geisel spelled backward – and one book under the name Rosetta Stone in collaboration Michael Frith. Various people illustrated these other books.

While a number of his books have a philosophical message, of course some of his books were just for fun. Twenty-seven publishing companies rejected his first book, *And to Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street*, partly because it lacked a clear lesson. Apparently, in those days, the protocol was that children's books must have a moral. Dr. Seuss said to his wife, "What's wrong with kids having fun reading without being preached at?" Finally, Vanguard Press published the book in 1937.

He won the Pulitzer Prize, and virtually every children's book award. Seven universities honored him with doctorates in literature and fine arts. (So he was really a doctor after all!)

His 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday, March 2, 1986, was the publication date of his book *You're Only Old Once*. Leave it to Dr. Seuss to make us laugh at old age!

Dr. Seuss died in 1991 at age 87. But his books live on, to make us smile and make us think.