

Divorce in Modern Jewish Culture

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at:

<http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/divorce-modern-jewish-culture>.

Introduction

Jewish divorce ritual, as distinct from civil divorce procedures, is rooted in laws set forth in the Torah, and their reinterpretation in rabbinic literature. Beginning in the biblical period, the husband had the exclusive right to end a marriage, although there were some protections for wives built into the divorce process. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, liberal movements of Judaism expressed concerns about the power imbalance in a Jewish divorce and began to accept civil divorce alone as a means for dissolving a marriage. More recently, liberal movements have begun to encourage people to have a Jewish divorce ceremony alongside a civil divorce, as a way of offering spiritual and psychological closure for a dissolving marriage.

This resource kit includes biblical sources as well as depictions of divorce in modern Jewish texts. In these modern texts, religious rituals exist in conversation with secular ideas of divorce; traditional gender roles and expectations come into contact with modern, more egalitarian ones. As students progress through these resources, they may wish to consider how the traditional practices are similar to or different from the modern legal, social, and familial divorce practices that many Jews participate in today.

Subjects

America, Eastern Europe, Feminism, Film, Literature, Marriage, Mishnah, Religion, Tanakh, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- The website My Jewish Learning contains a lot of interesting **background information** about Jewish divorce, including this **animated video** about the Jewish divorce process.
- *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* by Abraham Cahan is available for purchase in a number of places. It can be downloaded **here**.
- My Jewish Learning also offers a **brief introduction** to author Abraham Cahan. Those who wish to read further may enjoy this **recent biography** by Seth Lipsky.
- The film *Hester Street* can be purchased as a DVD or watched on **youtube**. Teachers may wish to consult the New York Times **review** of the movie for further information and



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reflections.

- For more on using *Hester Street* to teach about Jewish divorce, see this [reflection](#) in *In geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*.
- More information about Isaac Bashevis Singer can be found [here](#).

Resources

1: Source sheet, Jewish divorce in the Torah and Mishnah.

This is a collection of a few key texts from Torah and Mishnah that explain the rules and origins of Jewish divorce rituals.

Suggested Activity: Have your students discuss the following questions: Who has the power in a Jewish divorce according to the texts provided—the husband or the wife? Which words in the text indicate a sense of power or control? What do those words mean? Why do you think a new bill of divorce needs to be written for each woman receiving a Get? Ask students to write new versions of the texts, editing them in a way that they feel would redistribute the power more equitably.

Sources: Deuteronomy 24:1, Mishnei Torah, Positive Mitvot 222, Mishnah Gittin 1:4, Mishna Gittin 3:1. Source sheet compiled by Feygi Zylberman using [sefaria.org](#), 2016.

2: Excerpt, Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Divorce," 1983.

This fictional narrative describes a remembered divorce that took place in Poland.

Suggested activity: Have your students describe the elements of the divorce ritual that are present in the excerpt and discuss: Why does the narrator's father (the Rabbi) ask Shmelke the questions he asks him? Why do you think Salka isn't allowed to remarry for ninety days? What emotions do you think Salka and Shmelke are each feeling during the ceremony? The story seems to suggest that men have an easier time after divorce than women. Do you think this is true? Why or why not? Why does the narrator's mother suggest that it is improper for Shmelke to visit his children and ex-wife? What do you think of this limitation on Shmelke's relationship with his ex-wife? What is the meaning of the saying in the last line of the excerpt - "A good cow lets herself be milked"? Which character is being compared to a cow, and why?

Source: Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Divorce," *The New Yorker*, June 13, 1983, p. 45.

3: Cartoon, "A makeh" ("An Assault") from the Interwar Warsaw Yiddish humor magazine "Der Blofer," 1929.

This 1929 cartoon depicts a Jewish divorce proceeding. It presents a stereotypical image of a large and imposing Jewish woman and her smaller husband in a Rabbinical court. This image appears in a Tablet Magazine [article](#) by Eddy Portnoy, which teachers may also wish to consult, about divorces in Warsaw's Rabbinical court.

Suggested activity: Ask students to create a list of the stereotypes present in the cartoon. Then discuss: Is this cartoon funny? If so, why? To what extent are traditional gender roles reinforced or disrupted in the image? What does the cartoon suggest about the causes of divorce among Jewish couples? Who has power? Who do you sympathize with? Would you say the image is empowering or disempowering for women?

Ask students to think about the gender dynamics in contemporary divorce and to create their own cartoons highlighting those dynamics.

Source: "A makeh" from *Der Blofer*, 1929. (Photo by Eddy Portnoy)

4: Film excerpt, director Joan Micklin Silver's "Hester Street," 1975.

This is the divorce scene from the end of the film *Hester Street*. The film follows a young woman and her son who come to America to join her husband who immigrated earlier. While her husband has already assimilated to his new environment, the woman struggles to adapt to life in America. The situation causes conflict for the couple, and ultimately leads to the dissolution of their marriage. This scene depicts the Get-giving ceremony that is part of a traditional Jewish divorce and shows the emotional toll of the ritual on both the husband and the wife.

Suggested activity: Watch the clip. Ask your students: How does each character seem to feel during the ritual? Have students point to specific gestures, words, and expressions that illustrate the characters' feelings. Who has power in this scene? Does the ceremony afford more power to either the husband or the wife? What might the consequences of the Get be for the husband and for the wife? Why does the wife have to wait for a period before getting remarried, but not the husband? What, if anything, about this scene resonates with your experience of or feelings about divorce in contemporary life?

Source: *Hester Street*, directed by Joan Micklin Silver (1975; Home Vision Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

5: Excerpt from Abraham Cahan, "Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto," 1896.

Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto is the book on which the film *Hester Street* (1975) is based. In it, Abraham Cahan explores the struggles of immigrants adapting to life in America. This excerpt, found at the end of the book, describes the internal conflict of one of the protagonists, Jake, after his divorce. On the one hand, he is elated to now be free and on his way to marry his girlfriend Mamie; on the other hand, he fantasizes about returning to the home of his wife and son.

Suggested activity: Ask students to note down the reasons Jake gives for being happy to have gotten divorced, as well as the reasons he seems to suddenly feel depressed. Discuss: Why does Jake see himself as having been defeated? What has he lost? Why does he envision going back to his old home and asserting his authority there? What are the differences and similarities in how

Jake is depicted in the film *Hester Street*, versus in this excerpt?

Source: Abraham Cahan "Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto," (1896) in *Yekl and the Imported Bridegroom and Other Stories of Yiddish New York*. Dover Publications, 1970, p. 89.

6: Podcast excerpt, "What I Wore When...I Got Divorced," 2015.

In the *Glamour* magazine "What I Wore When..." mini-podcast series, designers and editors share narratives about their fashion choices at pivotal moments in their lives. In this episode, Sophia Chabbott, senior online fashion editor at *Glamour*, describes the outfit she wore to her Jewish divorce ceremony and the emotional weight of her sartorial choices.

Suggested Activity: Have your students listen to the excerpt or to the entire podcast (available at [this link](#)). Then discuss the following questions: Compared to the fictional texts you have explored in this kit, what surprised you about Chabbott's experience as a modern Jewish woman going through a divorce? How did Chabbott use her outfit to give her power during the divorce proceeding? Why do you think it was important for her to feel powerful? Can you think of a time in your life when you wanted to feel powerful? How did you convey that power, verbally or nonverbally? Have your students describe Chabbott's experience when she walked into the room for her divorce. Ask your students: Based on the texts in this kit, do you think that Get ceremonies put women in a powerless position? Why or why not?

Source: *Glamour* Magazine podcast, "What I Wore When...I Got Divorced," 2015. Published online at <http://www.glamour.com/story/podcast>. Sophia Chabbott/Glamour (c) Conde Nast