

# A Letter to Harvey Milk

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/letter-harvey-milk>.

### Introduction

"A Letter To Harvey Milk" is the powerful, titular story in a short story collection by Lesléa Newman that touches upon queer identity, Jewish identity, and "the intersection and collision between the two" ([lesleanewman.com](http://lesleanewman.com)). Narrator and Jewish senior citizen Harry Weinberg has signed up for a writing class to "pass the time," but finds himself troubled by the flood of painful memories that bubble to the surface when he begins the process, including those of his friendship with gay rights activist Harvey Milk, his marriage to his late wife Fanny, and his recollections of the Holocaust. This kit presents resources to help teachers explore the life and death of Harvey Milk and to discuss cultural, religious, and sexual identity in the context of the story.

### Subjects

Fiction, Film, Holocaust, Queer Jews, Social Commentary

### Reading and Background:

- The entire story, including a glossary of Yiddish terms, can be found in Lesléa Newman's collection of short stories entitled *A Letter to Harvey Milk*. For more information about the author, Lesléa Newman, visit her [website](#).
- The 1984 Academy Award-winning **documentary**, *The Times of Harvey Milk*, is one of the best collections of original footage from the political career of Harvey Milk, including speeches from before he took office, and interviews with his colleagues describing what it was like working with the man behind the new wave of gay rights activism.
- Randy Shilts' 1982 **biography** of Harvey Milk, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, not only chronicles the life of Milk as an activist, but also the history of gay rights activism in America.

### Resources

#### 1: An excerpt of "A Letter to Harvey Milk" read by Lesléa Newman, 2016.

Famed lesbian Jewish author Lesléa Newman reads a passage from her story in which Harry Weinberg completes a homework assignment for his writing class; the teacher has asked him to "write a letter to somebody from our past, somebody who's no longer with us." He chooses Harvey Milk, and expresses his pain over Harvey's way-too-early death by assassination.

**Suggested Activities:** If this kit is part of a unit on Harvey Milk and activism during this period, ask students to reflect on elements of Harry's letter. What does he reveal about the time period? Why does Harry first blame Harvey "for getting himself shot"? What inequities does he highlight about the trial? What elements of San Franciscans' response?

If the story is being read in an English class, ask students to look at the unique voice the author has created for Harry. Then, ask each student to work on shaping their own character and voice. What kind of speech patterns or idioms would their character use? Have each student write a letter in their own character's voice.

Or, ask students to interview an older person in their life. What is a story that this older person has never told anyone before?

**Source:** Newman, Lesléa. "A Letter To Harvey Milk." In *A Letter To Harvey Milk*, 33-47. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.

#### 2: Excerpt, "Harvey Milk, in Life and on Film, Typified the Proud Jew as Outsider," by Rebecca Spence.



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This piece addresses Milk's pride in his Jewish identity and examines how his outsider status ultimately fueled a progressive politics of love and inclusion.

**Suggested Activity:** Read this piece aloud and consider the following questions: How do secular Jews like Milk express their Jewishness? How did Milk's Jewish upbringing shape his politics? How do you see these Jewish experiences and expressions reflected in Newman's story?

**Source:** Spence, Rebecca. "Harvey Milk, in Life and on Film, Typified the Proud Jew as Outsider." *The Forward*. December 11, 2008. <http://bit.ly/2a04Xlu>.

### 3: Poster, "Silence=Death," and an excerpt of "A Letter to Harvey Milk" read by Lesléa Newman, 2016.

In the 1980s, while thousands of gay men were dying of AIDS, the U.S. government's official response included statements like, "It hasn't reached the general population yet." Artists and activists began using the pink triangle—which gay men had been forced to wear in Nazi concentration camps—as a way to raise awareness about the AIDS crisis, and this image of the triangle above the words "SILENCE=DEATH," became the activist group ACT UP's trademark, and a symbol for AIDS activism in general. In this excerpt from "A Letter to Harvey Milk," Harry encounters this symbol on the book bag of his writing teacher and is confused and hurt by its reappropriation.

**Suggested Activity:** Play the audio clip and follow along with the text. Then, look at the image as a class. The pink triangle was used by Nazis during the Holocaust and then by artists, activists, and members of ACT-UP—a radical coalition to fight AIDS. Why was the pink triangle chosen by activists, some of whom were Jewish, as a symbol to condemn the U.S. government and others for their failed response to the AIDS crisis? What do you make of this symbolism? What emotions did this image conjure for Harry? How did it make you feel?

**Sources:** Liclair, Christian. "Silence=Death-Project." *The Nomos of Images*. December 2015.

<https://nomoi.hypotheses.org/198>; Newman, Lesléa. "A Letter To Harvey Milk." In *A Letter To Harvey Milk*, 33-47. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004.

### 4: Excerpt of article, "Triangles and Tribulations: The Gay Appropriation of Nazi Symbols," by Amy Elman.

Elman provides an argument against the queer community's reclamation of the pink triangle, used by Nazis to label gay men during the Holocaust.

**Suggested Activity:** Have students read and discuss this excerpt, or the entire article, considering the following: Can a symbol of the Holocaust ever be reclaimed, even by queer Jews? What is behind this impulse to "reclaim"? What is gained or lost through this action? Why does Elman call this appropriation rather than reclamation? Do you ultimately agree or disagree with her?

**Source:** Elman, Amy. "Triangles and Tribulations: The Gay Appropriation of Nazi Symbols." *Trouble and Strife*.

<http://bit.ly/29QeS1Q>.

### 5: Audio Excerpt, "The Hope Speech" from "The Times Of Harvey Milk," 1984.

Harvey Milk delivered this speech in San Francisco, California, in 1978 after he was elected in 1977.

**Suggested Activity:** Have students watch the clip and answer the following questions: What made Harvey Milk different from other civil rights leaders? How did Milk advance the cause of civil rights among those who were resistant to his messages or causes? Was Harvey Milk a Jewish hero? A gay hero? If yes, how so?

Epstein, Robert P., Richard Schmiechen, and Harvey Fierstein. 1984. *The Times of Harvey Milk*. San Francisco, CA: Black Sand Productions.