

This Is the Moment I Trained for in Hebrew School

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/module/hebrew-school>.

Introduction

Hebrew School is an iconic institution of American Jewish communal and religious life, representing the desires and struggles of American Jewish communities, especially those affiliated with non-Orthodox movements, to transmit their beliefs, values, knowledge, and culture to the next generation. From its beginnings with the establishment of the Philadelphia Hebrew Sunday School Society in 1838 until the present moment, Jewish supplemental education has revealed much about what Jewish communities value and which elements of Jewish identity they want to transmit.

In Jewish American literature and popular culture, Hebrew School has come to epitomize the upwardly-mobile, suburban Jewish experience, perhaps because, for many non-Orthodox Jews, Hebrew School was their primary childhood encounter with a Jewish institution. Through historical and literary resources, this kit encourages teachers to examine with their students the roots of supplemental Jewish education, how it has changed over time, and its central role in the Jewish American literary imagination.

Subjects

Childhood, Jewish Education, Religion

Reading and Background:

- For background information about the history of American Jewish supplemental schools, see [this article](#) by Lloyd P. Gartner in the Encyclopedia of the Jewish Women's Archive and [this article](#) by Jonathan Sarna from the *Journal of Jewish Education*.
- Those who are particularly interested in the first Jewish Sunday School and its founder, Rebecca Gratz, should peruse [this blog](#) on Gratz and her context or consult Dianne Ashton's [biography](#) of Rebecca Gratz.
- Those who are particularly interested in later trends in Jewish education may find Jonathan Krasner's *The Benderly Boys and American Jewish Education* to be of particular interest.
- Our [resource kit on kheyder](#) offers background reading suggestions, resources, and activities for those who wish to learn about the religious education of Jewish children in Eastern Europe through the early part of the twentieth century.

Resources

1: Excerpt, Rosa Mordecai's account of early Philadelphia Sunday schools, circa 1850s.

Rosa Mordecai (1839-1936) was raised in an important nineteenth-century Jewish American family in Washington, D.C. She was devoted to merging women's spiritual lives as Jews with their secular lives in America. Mordecai's account of the Philadelphia Hebrew Sunday School, which was established as the first Jewish supplementary school of its kind in 1838 by Mordecai's great-aunt Rebecca Gratz, is one of the most thorough primary sources that exist on the subject. This excerpt describes the kind of instruction children received from Gratz at the school.

Suggested Activity: Discuss the following questions with your students: What are the aims of the lesson Miss Gratz teaches? What are the methods she employs? In what ways is this scene similar to religious school education today (in your experience)? In what ways is it most different? What kind of content do you imagine was papered over in the Christian Scripture lessons? If you had to adapt Christian materials for a Jewish classroom, how would you go about it today?

Source: Rosa Mordecai, "Rebecca Gratz and America's First Jewish Sunday School, 1838," in *The American Jewish Woman: A Documentary History*, ed. Jacob Rader Marcus (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1981), 135-143.

2: Excerpt, "Elementary Introduction to the Scriptures, for the use of Hebrew Children" by



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Simha C. Peixotto, 1840.

Simha C. Peixotto, one of the founding educators at the Philadelphia Hebrew Sunday School, wrote her *Elementary Introduction to the Scriptures for the Use of Hebrew Children* in 1840 to serve as a textbook for the Sunday school in which she taught. This catechism drew heavily upon Protestant Sunday School texts and instructional models.

Suggested Activity: Invite your students to act out a classroom scene. One student should serve as teacher, standing in the front of the classroom. He or she should read the questions in the excerpt, and the students should respond in unison. Then, ask students to report back on the experience. What did they learn? How would such instruction support Jewish identity formation or religious knowledge? What might be the shortcomings of this style of teaching?

Source: Simha C. Peixotto, *Elementary Introduction to the Scriptures for the Use of Hebrew Children*. (Philadelphia: Parry & McMillan, 1840), 157.

3: Excerpt from "Hibru" by Joseph Opatoshu, 1920, (trans. Jessica Kirzane).

Joseph Opatoshu (1886-1954) was a Yiddish novelist and short story writer known for his naturalistic writing. Among his large body of work were many pieces of writing (stories and novels) that depicted the American Jewish experience. His novel *Hibru* (1919), excerpted below, deals with the problems, contradictions, and hypocrisies of Jewish education in New York. In this excerpt, Friedkin, the Hebrew School (or Talmud-Torah) instructor, meets with his supervisor to discuss problems confronting his school.

Suggested Activities: Have students discuss the following questions: What are some possible reasons why the children in this story do not love Hebrew school? In his writing, Opatoshu often criticizes what he sees as the deficiencies and superficialities of the American Jewish community. Where do you see evidence of this in the excerpt? What is Friedkin's attitude toward Yiddish? What does he think are the priorities for Jewish education? Do you agree with him? What do you think a student fundamentally needs to know as part of their Jewish education?

Source: Joseph Opatoshu, *Hibru*. (New York: Maks N. Mayzel Farlag, 1920), pp. 41-43, translated by Jessica Kirzane.

4: Excerpt from "Who Would Be Free" by Marian Spitzer, 1924.

Marian Spitzer (1899-1983) was a novelist, journalist, and screenwriter who wrote middlebrow fiction with feminist content in a sharp-witted, ironic tone. In this excerpt, taken from the opening pages of her first novel, *Who Would Be Free*, the protagonist, Eleanor Hoffman, takes part in a Jewish confirmation ritual, the culminating ceremony of Reform Jewish education. Those interested in learning more about the confirmation ritual in Reform Judaism might consult [this article](#).

Suggested Activities: Ask students to write a list of Eleanor Hoffman's emotions during this brief passage. How many of them are related to her feelings about the religious ritual itself? How many are related to social factors?

Ask students to discuss the following questions: Eleanor tellingly replaces the word "congregation" with "audience." What is the relationship between theatrical performance and ritual? In what ways does this scene represent confirmation as a performance, and in what ways does it represent confirmation as a ritual? What point do you think the author is trying to make in emphasizing the theatrical elements of confirmation?

Source: Marian Spitzer, *Who Would Be Free* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 19-20.

5: Excerpt from "The Conversion of the Jews" by Philip Roth, 1958.

Philip Roth (born 1933) is an American novelist renowned for his intensely autobiographical fiction that provocatively explores and challenges Jewish and American identities. "The Conversion of the Jews" appeared in his first book, *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Short Stories*. In the story, a Hebrew school student, Ozzie Freedman, asks his teacher, Rabbi Binder, difficult questions that are seemingly naïve, but touch upon troubling paradoxes of religious faith.

Suggested Activities: Ask your students to try to answer Ozzie's questions as though they were his teacher. What kind of response would they offer to Ozzie in an attempt to teach him about Jewish faith and tradition? Then, ask your students to write new questions in the spirit of Ozzie's questions. What are the paradoxes of religious faith that they find most troubling and baffling?

Ask your students to discuss: What does this passage tell readers about how Ozzie's Hebrew school is taught? How does that compare to educational experiences your students have had?

Source: Philip Roth, "The Conversion of the Jews" in *Goodbye Columbus and Other Stories* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989) 141-142.

6: Film Excerpt, "A Serious Man," directed by the Coen Brothers, 2009.

A Serious Man is a dark comedy that follows a Minnesota Jewish man, Larry Gopnik, as his personal and professional life disintegrates. This scene (which has been edited here to remove an interwoven but unrelated scene) takes place early in the film and highlights Larry's son Danny's disaffected relationship to his Hebrew school, and his rebellious, skeptical approach to adult authority figures and to Jewish religion writ large.

Suggested Activities: Invite your students to describe the scene in their own words. Who are the participants? What are they doing? What are they supposed to be learning? Then, ask your students to discuss the following questions: What overall impression does this segment give about the experience of Jewish education? How would you view the clip differently if you did or did not understand the Hebrew? If you did or did not recognize the Hebrew letters around the blackboard? Who do you sympathize with as a viewer – the students or the teacher? Ask your students to imagine that Danny (the boy with the headphones) is sent to the principal's office, and they are the principal. What advice would they give him? How would they respond to his behavior?

Source: *A Serious Man*, directed by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen. (2009; Focus Features).

7: Excerpt from "Crossing California," by Adam Langer, 2005.

Adam Langer's novel *Crossing California* is a humorous coming-of-age novel centered on the teens of three families who live in Chicago's Jewish neighborhood of West Rogers Park in 1979. The interconnected band of characters navigate prosperity and need, alienation, love, and desire, through and within their Jewish identities. In this excerpt, Jill Wasserstein, who is about to become a Bat Mitzvah, is frustrated at the formulaic social rituals and conspicuous consumption surrounding the event. She attends K.I.N.S., a modern Orthodox synagogue in West Rogers Park, which was established in 1924 as Knesses Israel Nusach Sfar.

Suggested Activities: Ask students to characterize Bar and Bat Mitzvah culture in their own experience. How is it similar to or different from the rituals and receptions Jill attends? How does Jill's Bat Mitzvah experience compare to Eleanor Hoffman's Confirmation experience in *Who Would Be Free* (resource #4 above)?

A "champagne snowball" is an activity that was common at DJ-led Bar/Bat Mitzvah receptions in the 1980s in which the kids at the party would circle around the Bar or Bat Mitzvah, who would pick a dance partner. They would dance until the DJ said "champagne snowball," and then each of the dancers would pick a different partner, until everyone was dancing. Invite your students to do a "champagne snowball" or [another popular DJ-led Bar/Bat Mitzvah reception party game](#) (like "Coke vs. Pepsi"). Then, ask students to discuss how this party culture relates to the coming of age rituals of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah itself. Some possible answers include the element of public performance, the idea of stepping into adult roles (like participating in romance), and the ritualized nature of the games.

Source: Adam Langer, *Crossing California*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 200-201.

8: Video excerpt, "HappyISH," Season 1, Episode 9, 2015.

HappyISH is a satirical comedy-drama series written and created by Shalom Auslander for Showtime. It aired for one season in 2015. In this clip, Lee, an artist who struggles balancing work and parenting, takes her son Julius to Hebrew school to give him a sense of spirituality but winds up feeling alienated by its optimistic, over-earnest tone and simplistic answers to complicated theological questions. Lee, estranged from her Jewish faith and family, wants to share something of Jewishness with her son, but does not find what she is looking for in this satirized portrait of Hebrew School.

Suggested Activity: Discuss the following questions with your students: What do you think Lee came to this Hebrew School hoping to find? What does she find instead? What are the implicit criticisms of Hebrew school in this clip? This episode aired on Showtime to a mixed audience of Jews and non-Jews. How might Jews and non-Jews perceive this scene differently? Ask your students to describe the teacher. How does her approach to, or relationship with, Jewishness appear to be different from Lee's? How does this portrayal of a Hebrew school teacher compare to the portrayals of teachers in the other resources in this kit?

Source: *HappyISH*, season 1, episode 9, "Starring Mr. Mike, Joseph McCarthy and Alfred Bernhard Nobel," directed by Shalom Auslander, aired June 21, 2015, on Showtime, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://www.sho.com/video/36598/hebrew-school>.

9. Image, protest sign, Washington, D.C., January 29, 2017.

This sign was spotted at a rally protesting Donald Trump's January 2017 executive order banning immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the U.S.

Suggested Activity: Discuss the following questions with your students: What are you trained for in Hebrew school? Are any of the students in the above resources trained for political protest in Hebrew school? In what ways does this sign run counter to popular ideas about Hebrew school? What do you think the sign holder means by "this is the moment I trained for in Hebrew school?" What do you think he or she learned in Hebrew school that brought them to this particular rally?

Source: Image posted to Twitter by @mpitkowsky under the hashtag #makehebrewschoolgreatagain. Photo Credit: Joshua Israel.