

Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/philip-roths-conversion-jews>.

Introduction

Philip Roth's short story, "The Conversion of the Jews," written and published when the author was in his mid-twenties, helped to establish his reputation as one of the most exciting writers in America. It was first published in *The Paris Review*, in the spring of 1958, and then included in Roth's collection *Goodbye, Columbus and Five Stories* (1959), which won both the National Book Award and the National Jewish Book Award. In focusing on the conflict between a Hebrew school student and his teacher, the story presents some of the central questions that might perplex and challenge modern Jewish teens, in an accessible, funny, and thought-provoking form; scholar of Yiddish and Jewish-American literature Jeremy Dauber has called it "a deep dive into American Jewish theology."

This kit offers background sources on the religious questions raised by the story, some audio clips, and other multimedia resources to complement discussions of the story.

Cover image: Detail of one of Roger Barr's illustrations of "The Conversion of the Jews," which appeared alongside it in its original publication in *The Paris Review*.

Subjects

Childhood, Fiction, Jewish Education, Theology

Reading and Background:

- The full text of the story is available online at *The Paris Review* ([subscription required](#)), or in Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*, and in many anthologies. In addition to the audio version linked below, there is also a version of the story performed by Elliott Gould, available in an audio collection from the Yiddish Book Center and KCRW, *Jewish Short Stories from Eastern Europe and Beyond*.
- Roth was born in Newark in 1933, and began publishing stories in the mid-1950s. He has published more than thirty books, including novels, memoirs, and collections of essays, and has won all of the major U.S. literary awards. Short biographies are widely available online — see [this one](#), from the Philip Roth Society. The most extensive biographical study so far is Claudia Roth Pierpont's *Roth Unbound*.
- The story's Ozzie can be understood as a questioner taking part in a venerable Jewish tradition of questioning everything. For short essays about that tradition of questioning, see, for example, "[The Necessity of Asking Questions](#)," by the former Chief Rabbi of England, Lord Jonathan Sacks, or "[A Tradition of Questioning Tradition](#)," from the sociologist Bethamie Horowitz.

Resources

1: Untitled illustration for Roth's story, Roger Barr, 1958.

When "The Conversion of the Jews" was first published in *The Paris Review*, this illustration by the artist Roger Barr preceded the story. It captures a key moment from the narrative: "Itzie ... raised one finger on his left hand, gestured it meaningfully towards the rabbi's back, and brought the house down."

Suggested activity: Without being told, see if the students can find the moment in the text to which the illustration refers. Ask



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them to talk about the style in which Barr represents the boys. Why would he focus on this moment, in particular, for his illustration?

Source: Roger Barr, untitled illustration to Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews," *The Paris Review* (Spring 1958), 22.

2: Untitled illustration for Roth's story, Roger Barr, 1958.

This illustration appears toward the end of the story and captures Ozzie's perspective as he looks down from the roof.

Suggested activity: Again, without being told, see if the students can find the moment in the text to which the illustration refers. Ask them to consider perspective: why represent the scene from this angle? What does it allow the viewer to see that wouldn't otherwise be available to them from the writer's description?

Source: Roger Barr, untitled illustration to Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews," *The Paris Review* (Spring 1958), 38-39.

3: Audio excerpts of Nitzan Sharron reading Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews," 2005.

Nitzan Sharron, a British actor, read Roth's story aloud for London's Jewish Book Week in 2005. The first excerpt here includes the end of Sharron's introduction, which gives a sense of his regular speaking voice. There, he dedicates his performance to his great-uncle, the Reverend Saul Amias — a well-known rabbi and community leader in the London suburb of Edgware — whose 98th birthday would have taken place on the day he is doing this reading. It also contains the first lines of the story (in which he performs as Ozzie and Itzie). The second excerpt is an example of how Sharron performs Rabbi Binder's voice.

Suggested activity: Before playing the clip, ask students to identify some lines of dialogue from Ozzie, Itzie, Rabbi Binder, and Blotnick in the text. Ask them to imagine how these characters' voices should sound. Point out that Binder's voice is described as being "like a statue, real slow and deep" and "a voice that, could it have been seen, would have looked like the writing on a scroll." Each student should choose one line and perform it in the voice of the character it is attributed to.

Then play the clip, and ask students to describe the sound of these characters' voices in Sharron's performance. They might even perform their chosen lines again, now imitating how they would have sounded if Sharron had read them. Discuss what gives a voice authority, and why — why does a deeper voice sound more authoritative than a higher-pitched one (if indeed it does to them)? What makes a voice sound funny? Ask students to talk about their own voices, how they're told to speak, and how they're perceived.

Source: Nitzan Sharron, reading of "The Conversion of the Jews," March 9, 2005, <<http://www.jewishbookweek.com/past-events/768>>, accessed April 10, 2018.

4: Quotation, Charles Liebman, 1970.

This quotation, from an important essay by the respected sociologist Charles Liebman, is the first item in a list of "the major ideas, symbols, and institutions arousing the deepest loyalties and passions of American Jews." It is a clear statement, which Liebman believes expresses a value shared by "most American Jews," of what the historian Jonathan Sarna has called the "cult of synthesis in American Jewish culture." This is Sarna's term for the historical insistence among many American Jews that Jewish and American values are completely complementary.

Suggested activity: Before showing the quotation, have students discuss Ozzie's question about the Jews as "the Chosen People" and the Declaration of Independence's statement that "all men are created equal"; ask them why this bothers Ozzie. Once students have a clear sense of what the conflict is between a core Jewish value on the one hand and a core American value on the other, discuss the claim Liebman presents. Aside from Ozzie's example, does it seem true? Can the students think of concrete situations in which Jewish and American values might be in conflict? Ask students why they think this idea of synthesis between American and Jewish values would have been so important to American Jewish thinkers and leaders throughout history.

Source: Charles Liebman, "Reconstructionism in American Jewish Life," *American Jewish Year Book* 71 (1970), 3-99, at 68.

5: Sefaria source sheet, "All Jews Are Responsible One for Another," 2018.

This source sheet contains two quotations from rabbinic literature that insist that all Jews are responsible for one another.

Suggested activity: Point out Ozzie’s question about “some of his relations’ always picking out the Jewish names” after a plane crash, and how Rabbi Binder responds by “explain[ing] cultural unity and some other things.” Ask students whether they know anyone, like Ozzie’s relatives, who look for Jewish names in lists of tragedies or celebrations (e.g., when Nobel Prizes are awarded). Ask them to think about why people do that – in what sense is this “cultural unity”? Show the sources on the source sheet, and ask what the relationship is between such acts of “cultural unity” and the traditional idea that Jews are responsible for one another. Spend time close-reading the sources, if possible, and think about how they present this idea differently. Finally, ask students why Ozzie objects to “cultural unity” – why does he feel it is a problem for his relatives and Rabbi Binder to pursue “cultural unity”?

Source: Josh Lambert, “All Jews Are Responsible One for Another,” Sefaria.org Source Sheet (April 2018), <<https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/105827>>, accessed April 10, 2018.

6: Article excerpts, Rabbi Simon Glustrom’s “Saving A Life (Pikuach Nefesh),” 1988.

In these excerpts, Rabbi Simon Glustrom explains that saving a life “takes precedence over all the other commandments in Judaism.” (The row of asterisks represents the beginning of a new excerpt from a bit later in the article.)

Suggested activity: Ask students if they know what the concept of “*pikuekh nefesh*” is (“pikuach nefesh” in Modern Hebrew pronunciation). Read and discuss the excerpt together. Ask students if they can imagine situations in which Jews would have to break commandments to save their own or others’ lives. Ask them how this concept is relevant to the story Roth tells in “Conversion of the Jews”: whose life is at stake, and what commandment would need to be broken to save it?

Source: Rabbi Simon Glustrom, “Saving a Life (Pikuach Nefesh),” MyJewishLearning.com, <<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/saving-a-life-pikuach-nefesh/>>, accessed April 10, 2018, reprinted from Glustrom, *The Language of Judaism* (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, Inc., 1988).

7: Article excerpt, Rabbi Jack Abramowitz’s “296. Kiddush Hashem: The obligation to sanctify God’s Name,” ca. 2010-2018.

In this excerpt, Rabbi Jack Abramowitz explains the concept of kiddush hashem, the 296th mitzvah given in the Torah. It states a person’s obligation to die rather than break three key commandments.

Suggested activity: Ask students: according to Orthodox belief, would Ozzie’s demand that his classmates and teachers profess belief in Jesus Christ constitute a situation in which death would be preferable to sin? If so, what does it say about this community that its members are willing to do what he asks? Regarding this text from Abramowitz, ask students to consider what it might mean to be commanded to be “zealous” in *disregarding* the commandments, when usually zealousness is thought to involve extreme *adherence* to them.

Source: Rabbi Jack Abramowitz, “Kiddush Hashem: The obligation to sanctify God’s Name,” in series “Taryag” of the 613 *mitsves*, <<https://www.ou.org/torah/mitzvot/taryag/mitzvah296/>> (ca. 2010-2018), accessed April 10, 2018.

8: Interview excerpt, Walter Mauro and Elena Clementelli speak with Philip Roth, 1974.

In this section of an interview Roth gave about fifteen years after the story was originally published, he describes the story and how he thinks about it.

Suggested activity: Ask students what they think Roth means when he says the story is about “the oppressiveness of family feeling” and “binding ideas of religious exclusiveness.” Why does Roth describe the story as “primitive”? Do the story or any of its details seem, to you, to be the work of an immature writer, and if so, how? How would *you* characterize the tone or quality of Roth’s writing in the story?

Source: Walter Mauro and Elena Clementelli, *The American Poetry Review* 3:4 (July/August 1974), 18-20, at 19.