

Yehuda Amichai's "Wildpeace"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://www.teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/yehuda-amichais-wildpeace>.

Introduction

"When I was young, the whole country was young," wrote the poet Yehuda Amichai in a 1978 poem (trans. Chana Bloch). Born Ludwig Pfeuffer in 1924 in Würzburg, Germany, the poet and his family immigrated to Mandatory Palestine in 1935. Years later, he would change his name to "Amichai," Hebrew for "my people lives." His first collection, *Now and in Other Days*, appeared in 1955 to wide acclaim. In these early poems, he drew in part from his experiences in the *Palmach*, the fighting force of the Haganah (a Jewish paramilitary organization in Mandatory Palestine), and the 1948 war that followed the establishment of the State of Israel. Throughout his long career as a poet, Amichai frequently returned to the subjects of war and peace, conflict and desire, faith and doubt. His poem "Wildpeace" (*Shlom bar*) was published in his 1971 collection *Not for the Sake of Remembering*, a few years after the 1967 Six-Day War, a war fought between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Although the result was a major victory for Israel, resulting in major territorial gains for the country, the tone of Amichai's poem is cautious and skeptical. "Wildpeace" poses the following question: is it possible to break the cycle of war and conflict and ensure that peace becomes a lasting inheritance between generations? In 1994, Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Yasser Arafat, President of the Palestinian National Authority, and Israel's Foreign Minister Shimon Peres. Amichai was invited to participate in the prize giving ceremony, where he read this poem.

Cover image: In 2006, conceptual artist Jenny Holzer projected a series of texts onto government buildings and cultural institutions in Vienna, Austria. In this projection, she used text from Yehuda Amichai's "Wildpeace."

Image courtesy of Jenny Holzer/ Art Resource, NY © ARS, NY. © 2006 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Photo by Attilio Maranzano.

Subjects

Hebrew, Israel-Palestine, Poetry, Translation

Reading and Background

- Amichai's 1989 [interview](#) with radio host Henry Lyman provides an excellent introduction to his life and work. The recording includes readings and discussions of select poems.
- Amichai's work has been the subject of serious scholarly inquiry for many decades. Full-length studies of his work in English include Glenda Abramson's *The Writing of Yehuda Amichai: A Thematic Approach* (1989, SUNY Press), Nili Scharf-Gold's *Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet* (2009, Brandeis University Press), and Chana Kronfeld's *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (2015, Stanford University Press).
- "Wildpeace" was published a few years after the 1967 Six-Day War. For background on this war and its aftermath, see Jeremy Brown's article "[1967 War: Six Days That Changed the Middle East](#)."
- Marc Smith's 2014 article "[Bang: The Troubled Legacy of Toy Guns](#)" offers a brief history of the toy gun and an overview of current debates on gun play and gun violence. This context may prove helpful when addressing resource #5.
- Amichai's poetry was featured in the first issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, founded and edited by Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort. This marked one of Amichai's earliest appearances in English translation. According to Amichai, these translations "sent [him] into orbit," introducing his work to a wide readership outside of Israel. You can view the [entire first issue online](#).
- Numerous English-language translations of Amichai's poetry have appeared over the years. Notable collections that are still in print include *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell), *Open Closed Open* (trans.



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- Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld), and *The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (edited by Robert Alter with multiple translators).
- In spring of 1992, *The Paris Review* published Lawrence Joseph's interview with Amichai, part of its famous "The Art of Poetry" series. The interview took place in various cafés in New York City's Greenwich Village and covered a wide range of topics, including Amichai's relationship with his English-language translators.

Resources

1: Poem, Yehuda Amichai's "Wildpeace," 1971, and audio excerpt of Amichai reading the poem, 1998.

This poem, from Amichai's sixth collection *Not for the Sake of Remembering* (*Ve-lo 'al manat lizkor*), is divided into two stanzas that do not appear to follow a regular pattern of rhyme or meter. However, a close reading of the poem begins to reveal its structure, particularly the poet's use of long and short lines to create specific emphases and pauses. Lines 3 and 10, for example, consist of one word each, and lines 11 and 17 are the longest lines of the poem. The title "*shlom bar*" is an example of the construct form in Hebrew, combining the Hebrew words "*shalom*" (peace) and "*bar*" (field, open country, wilderness) into "peace of (the) field/wild." "*Bar*" is also an Aramaic word for "owner" or "son." As an adjective in Hebrew, it can mean "clean," "pure," and "beloved." Some translators have chosen to translate "*bar*" as an adjective—wild peace—but Chana Bloch's decision to create a compound word acknowledges the grammar of the original Hebrew.

Suggested Activities: Ask students to consider the poem's understanding of peace. What is "wildpeace" and how does it differ from "the peace of a cease-fire"? What are some of the different images of peace that the poem proposes? What adjectives, nouns, and metaphors does the author use to describe this peace? Consider Amichai's use of contrast—for example, the poem describes peace as both "heavy" and "light." How do these different images and descriptions of "wildpeace" compare to one another? Are these images of peace specific to the conflict in Israel/Palestine or more universal? Ask students to think about the conflicts of their time. Have students come up with their own imagery to describe the resolution of a conflict, either personal or political.

Source: "*Shlom bar*," in *Shirei Yehuda Amichai*, Vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 2003).

Yehuda Amichai, "Wildpeace," trans. Chana Bloch, in *Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2011). Bloch's translation is available [online](#).

Yehuda Amichai, "Wildpeace," 92nd Street Y, New York, April 20, 1998, mp3, <https://soundcloud.com/92y/yehuda-amichai-reads-from-his-work>.

2: Biblical excerpts, Isaiah 2:4 and Isaiah 11:6.

Amichai's poem includes two major biblical references, both drawn from the prophetic book of Isaiah. The first (line 2) draws its imagery from the vision of peace put forth in Isaiah 11:6. The second reference occurs in line 11 and takes its language from Isaiah 2:4.

Suggested Activities: Ask students to reread the poem in light of these biblical sources. Amichai could have used any of the other images offered in these two quotations (for example, "spears into pruninghooks" instead of "swords into plowshares"), but how would doing so change our reading of the poem? Try substituting the imagery in lines 2 and 11 with other images from their respective biblical verses and discuss how doing so not only changes how one reads the poem but also alters the relations between images that Amichai emphasizes. Amichai's references to biblical texts also call attention to what remains unstated in the poem. Does reading all of Isaiah 11, for example, expand our understanding of the poem? Consider the final image of Isaiah 11:6—"and a child shall lead them"—and how it resonates in Amichai's poem and its preoccupation with inheritance. Students could also look at the rest of Isaiah 2:4 and reflect on its vision of a world without war.

Source: Isaiah 2:4, Isaiah 11:6, trans. Jewish Publication Society, 1985. Source sheet compiled by Sadie Gold-Shapiro using sefaria.org, 2018.

3: Image, Jenny Holzer, "Not the peace of a cease-fire," 2006.

In 2006, the U.S. visual artist Jenny Holzer included this poem as part of a series of light projections that she screened on various buildings in Vienna, Austria, many of them attached to major cultural and governmental institutions. These texts drew from poems by internationally recognized poets, Amichai among them. The first five lines of Chana Bloch's translation of "Wildpeace" were projected on the Office of the Federal President of the Republic of Austria on May 7, 2006. The text is centered and introduces line breaks that are not present in Bloch's translation of the poem. The fifth line is cut off after the word "about," leaving out the final words of the line, "a great weariness."

Suggested Activities: Show students Holzer's image of Amichai's words, as well as [other images from her Vienna 2006 projection series](#), and ask them to think about what can be gained from seeing the poem in this context. Why might Holzer have chosen to include "Wildpeace" and these particular lines from the poem? Compare reading the poem in this format to reading the poem on a printed page. Invite students to create their own visual reworkings of the poem. Students may create signs using large poster paper or light projections by stencilling out the words and shining light from the other side of the page (with a flashlight, for example). If allowed, they could write out these lines in chalk outside of the school. Posters could be displayed along the school hallway. A textual commentary could accompany each image. Have them discuss why they have selected the particular language they have extracted from the poem and consider how their reading of the poem changes in this visual and material form. Have them think about what gives poetic language particular charge. For example, do the words "but rather" carry a different weight and meaning when they are placed on a separate line? What kind of associations or meanings are activated when they choose to highlight certain words and images over others?

Source: Courtesy: Jenny Holzer/ Art Resource, NY © ARS, NY. © 2006 Jenny Holzer, member Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

For Vienna, 2006. Text: "Wildpeace" from *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* by Yehuda Amichai. English translation by Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell, © 1986, 1996 by the translators. Used/reprinted with permission of the University of California Press.

Photo: Attilio Maranzano Vienna, Austria

4: Poem, a second translation of Yehuda Amichai's "Wildpeace," 1971.

Amichai is one of the most widely translated Hebrew poets of the twentieth century. English translations of his work began to appear in the early 1960s, and his friendship with English-language poets like Ted Hughes, Dennis Silk, and Harold Schimmel, all of whom promoted Amichai's work in translation, facilitated the global circulation of his poetry. Languages are not static, so reading English translations of Amichai gives us a glimpse into how the English language has changed over the past fifty years (and more). We also observe how ideas about literary translation have developed and how translators over the years have been drawn to different areas of Amichai's oeuvre—and sometimes to the same poems—thereby giving us a wide range of translated and retranslated material to enjoy and study.

Suggested Activities: Have students compare the translation of "Wildpeace" from resource 1 to the translation of the poem provided here, in resource 4. In this exercise, the emphasis should be on the value of retranslation and multiple translations. What new perspective on the poem does each translation offer, and how do the translators signal—in their word choices, line breaks, differences, and similarities—their distinct understandings of the poem? Go through each translation highlighting all of the differences and similarities. Use different colors to highlight nouns, verbs, and adjectives. How does the difference between "wildpeace" and "wild peace" predispose us to read the poem a certain way? Look up information about the translators—can we glean any meaningful insights from this biographical information (for example, Chana Bloch was an English-language poet)? Consider how context shapes translation—the time and place in which translations happen. If students are able to read the original Hebrew, ask them to compare the translations with the original but to focus on what is gained rather than lost in translation.

Source: Yehuda Amichai, "Wild Peace," in *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry 1948–1994*, trans. by Benjamin and Barbara Harshav (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 203.

5: Image, Rachel Papo, "Defense training in the event of a suicide attack," 2005.

In Amichai's poem, the speaker observes how his son plays with a toy gun "that knows/ how to open and close its eyes and say Mama" (lines 8 and 9). This is an example of personification, a figure of speech that confers human qualities or characteristics to an object or animal. Through his use of personification, Amichai suggests a close relationship between the child and the toy gun,

between child's play and the real violence of war.

Rachel Papo (1970) was born in Columbus, OH and raised in Israel. This photograph is from her 2008 series "Serial No. 3817131," which chronicles the experiences of young Israeli women during their compulsory military service. This particular image was taken during a training exercise. As in most of Papo's images, it is left to the viewer to decide what is happening inside the frame. Are the soldiers nervous, excited, bored, tired, or playing dead? Are the guns pointing at a specific or imagined target?

Suggested Activities: What kind of human characteristics does Amichai attribute to the gun and why are these meaningful in the context of the poem? What does this personification tell us about the speaker's relationship to violence and conflict? Ask the students to spend some time looking at Papo's photograph and make note of how the artist composes this image. Which parts of the gun stand out? Is there a message or critique that this image is communicating, and how does Papo suggest this? Papo and Amichai work in different media, but by placing their work side by side, we can discern overlapping concerns regarding the place of violence and conflict in Israeli culture, play and war, and the relation between guns and power (and how this connects to gender). Papo now lives in the United States, which opens up these questions to the U.S. context as well. Ask students to compare the poem and photograph taking these relations into consideration.

Source: Rachel Papo, "Defense training in the event of a suicide attack," Southern Israel, 2005. <https://www.rachelpapo.com/serial-no-3817131>.

6: Photograph, "Passing the Baton," 1939.

In "Wildpeace," Amichai writes: "the howl of the orphans is passed from one generation / to the next, as in a relay race: the baton never falls" (lines 17–19), offering a vision of the future in which war never ceases and each generation passes on this legacy.

Suggested Activity: Using the image of the relay race as a prompt, ask students to write about the figurative and material "batons" that they carry in their daily lives. These can be memories, family stories, and/or physical traits that connect them to previous generations. Are these batons burdens or welcome responsibilities? What do they hope to pass on to the next generation? Ask the students to consider how the meaning of lines 17–19 changes when you remove the parentheses. Must the legacy and trauma of war, as referenced in his poem, be passed down indefinitely or does Amichai's poem, and our reading of it, offer a way out of this relay race?

Source: Val Weaver and Vera Askew passing the baton in a relay race, Brisbane, 1939, photograph, [Wikimedia commons](#), accessed April 23, 2019.