

# Yehudah Leib Gordon's "Awake, My People!"

## A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

### Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/yehudah-leib-gordons-awake-my-people>.

### Introduction

In 1866, Yehuda Leib Gordon published "Awake, My People!" in the Hebrew-language magazine *HaKarmel*. Gordon was a key early proponent of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, and this poem was seen—and used—as a rallying cry for how people of the day could reach their potential as both Jews and Russians. The poem presents an opportunity to explore several different ideas with students, including assimilation, the history of the *Haskalah* as it appeared in Russia, and the use of Biblical references in modern poetry.

Cover image: *Maskilim*, followers of the Jewish Enlightenment, including Y. L. Gordon at top right. Image used with permission from YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

### Subjects

Eastern Europe, Haskalah, Hebrew, Poetry, Tanakh

### Reading and Background:

- For good, succinct biographies of Gordon, see the [Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature](#) and the [YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe](#).
- The YIVO Encyclopedia also has more information on the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment movement, of which Gordon was a key figure.
- For a longer, scholarly look at Gordon's life and work, see Michael Stanislawski's *For Whom Do I Toil? Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

### Resources

#### 1: Poem, Yehudah Leib Gordon's "Awake, My People!" in Hebrew, 1866, and in English translation, 1988.

This is the complete text of Y. L. Gordon's poem, in the original Hebrew, and in English translation.

**Suggested Activities:** After the students have read the poem, have a discussion including some of the following questions: Who was Gordon's intended audience for this poem? Who is the poet addressing? What can we infer about that audience based on the text? What can we infer about Gordon?

**Sources:** Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil?: Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

#### 2: Images, "Maskilim" and "HaKarmel" cover page.

The first image consists of portraits of *maskilim* (Jewish Enlightenment thinkers and writers). Y. L. Gordon is pictured in the top right. The second image is the cover of the Hebrew periodical *HaKarmel*, in which "Awake, My People!" was first published. When



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its first issue was published in 1860 in Vilnius, *HaKarmel* became the first Hebrew-language weekly newspaper in Russia.

**Suggested Activity:** Have students look at the *maskilim* portraits and consider the following questions: What physical characteristics do all of these *maskilim* have in common? How would you describe them as a group? What might you infer about the *haskalah* from these images?

Then have students study the cover of *HaKarmel*. Which languages appear on the image? What kind of design aesthetic is used? If anyone in the class is able to read any of text, ask them to share what information they can? Even if no one can read the Hebrew or Russian, what can be gleaned about the *haskalah* from this cover, and how might this relate to "Awake, My People!"?

**Sources:** Ayzik Meyer Dik (center) and other *maskilim*; (clockwise from top) Mikhel Gordon, Yehudah Leib Gordon, Tsevi ha-Kohen Rabinovich, and Eli'ezer Zweifel. Used with permission from the [YIVO Institute for Jewish Research](#).

*HaKarmel* cover, unknown author, editor Samuel Joseph Fuenn (1819-1891), [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons.

### 3: Collection of Biblical references found in Y. L. Gordon's, "Awake, My People!"

This sheet highlights some of the poem's numerous Biblical references. Note that in many cases Gordon uses particular words to signal something to his audience, but the signal can only be received if the audience knows the Biblical reference. While his references are brief, much meaning can be gleaned if the larger Biblical story and context are known.

**Suggested Activities:** After reading the poem and gathering students' initial reactions, have students look at each of the lines with a Biblical reference and then at the Biblical references themselves. Encourage them to read a few verses before and after each citation (both in the poem and in the Bible). What, in general, does Gordon gain from using words or phrases with religious resonance? Who might have been the audience for Gordon's poem? What is he assuming about his audience? What does each individual reference add to the poem?

Have students write new footnotes to the poem, explaining the meaning behind the references.

**Sources:** Sheet compiled by Rachel Meytin. All Hebrew and English Biblical texts are drawn from [www.sefaria.org](http://www.sefaria.org). The English translation of "Awake, My People," by Y. L. Gordon is Michael Stanislawski's.

### 4: Excerpt from poem, Y. L. Gordon's "Awake, My People!" in Hebrew, 1866, and in English translation, 1988.

These two lines from the poem are widely cited and might be considered the crux of the poem's argument.

**Suggested Activities:** Focus in on these two lines of the poem, asking students some of these questions:

- How do you understand these lines?
- What do you think Gordon means by be a "man" versus be a "Jew"?
- Gordon uses the word "אָדָם" rather than "אָיִן" to mean "person" or "man." "אָדָם" (Adam) evokes the Garden of Eden and the Judeo-Christian origin story, while "אָיִן," when it appears in Pirkei Avot 2:5, is understood to refer to a person of moral courage. Does that difference matter?
- "בְּבֵיתוֹ" is translated as "at home" but literally it means "in your tents." How does this translation choice change our reading of the poem?
- The second line refers to being a brother and a servant. Can you find an allegory from Biblical texts where being a brother and a servant were in conflict? How was that conflict resolved? Is Y. L. Gordon hoping for a similar resolution?

**Sources:** Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil?: Judah Leib Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

### 5: Text excerpt from Elliott Abram's "Faith or Fear" and audio excerpt from Cynthia Ozick's "The Artist as Dreamer."

These two sources both see Gordon as having made a profound mistake. Elliott Abrams is a prominent American

neoconservative who served in foreign policy positions in the Reagan and George W. Bush administrations. In an excerpt from his 1999 book *Faith or Fear*, he claims that Gordon was wrong to think it was possible to separate private religious practice from public identity. Cynthia Ozick is one of the most celebrated American Jewish authors of fiction and criticism, and this excerpt comes from the question and answer period of a lecture she gave at the Jewish Public Library in Montreal on November 8, 1980. She, too, sees Gordon's line (which she misattributes, as has commonly been done, to the Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn) as representing "great Jewish cowardice."

**Suggested Activity:** Have students read Abrams's excerpt aloud without telling them who wrote it. Ask them what they can infer about the author's politics or ideas on the basis of how he interprets Gordon's line. Ask students whether they agree with Abrams that "an end to rituals" inevitably "undercut[s] faith as well," and ask them to draw on their own experiences to argue for or against this idea. Next, play the excerpt from Ozick's lecture and ask students to paraphrase what Ozick means when she says Gordon's idea can be thought of as responsible for creating a "segment of German-Jewry which so annihilated its idiosyncratic Jewish culture that it led itself to a point of vast self-despising." Does she see the risk of following Gordon's advice as larger or smaller than Abrams does?

**Sources:** Elliot Abrams, *Faith or Fear: How Jews Can Survive in Christian America* (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 21.

Cynthia Ozick, "The Artist as Dreamer" (November 8, 1980), The Frances Brandt Online Yiddish Audio Library.

## 6: Text excerpt, "The Five Lives of a Jewish Day School Grad," by Micah Lapidus, [ejewishphilanthropy.com](http://ejewishphilanthropy.com), 2012.

Micah Lapidus is a Reform rabbi in Atlanta, Georgia, who teaches at The Alfred & Adele Davis Academy, a Reform Jewish day school. In this article, he cites Gordon while outlining five important principles for Jewish education, and suggests that Gordon's dictum does not apply anymore because now young Jews are expected to "engage in the broader (and often secular) society as Jews."

**Suggested Activity:** Have students read the excerpt aloud without telling them who wrote it or where it appeared. Then ask them what they can infer about the author's politics or ideas on the basis of how he responds to Gordon. Ask them whether they agree that it is expected that Jews should act as Jews (as opposed to acting simply as citizens of their countries, or as humans) when they engage in broad issues, like American politics or social justice initiatives, and why.

**Source:** Micah Lapidus, "The Five Lives of a Jewish Day School Grad," [ejewishphilanthropy.com](http://ejewishphilanthropy.com), June 10, 2012, <https://ejewishphilanthropy.com/the-five-lives-of-a-jewish-day-school-grad/>.

## 7: Text excerpt, "The Birth of Theatrical Liberalism," Andrea Most, 2010.

Andrea Most, scholar of American Jewish theater, attempts to explain in this article the prominence of Jews in the history of American theater and Hollywood. She does this, in part, by citing Gordon and suggesting that the "defining feature" of "the writing of modernizing Jews" was "the theatrical sense of playing a role in public."

**Suggested Activity:** Ask students to read and summarize Most's point. Ask them whether they agree that being Jewish involves "playing a role in public" and, if they agree that it does, whether Jews are, in this sense, similar to or different from Americans from other religious or ethnic backgrounds. Ask them to demonstrate, in front of the class, ways that they or other people they know have performed their Jewishness or humanness in their speech, behavior, or other actions.

**Source:** Andrea Most, "The Birth of Theatrical Liberalism," in Courtney Bender and Pamela E. Klassen, eds., *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 138-39.