

Ayelet Tsabari's "Say It Again, Say Something Else"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/ayelet-tsabaris-say-it-again-say-something-else>.

Introduction

Ayelet Tsabari is an Israeli writer of Yemeni descent who lives in Canada and writes in English, her second language. Her short story, "Say it Again, Say Something Else," was part of her 2013 collection *The Best Place on Earth*, which won the prestigious Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature in 2015.

"Say it Again" explores questions of identity in contemporary Israel through the character of Lily, a teenage girl who has recently come from Canada to live with her aunt and cousin in Petah Tikva, Israel, after the death of her mother. Lily is of Yemeni descent which, in Israeli society, makes her *Mizrahi*. "Mizrahi," Hebrew for "eastern" (plural "Mizrahim") is a catch-all identity referring to Israeli Jews whose family roots are in Asia, Africa, and the Arabic-speaking regions of North Africa, the Levant, and the Arabian Gulf. Mizrahi culture in Israel has historically been marginalized by the dominant Ashkenazi, or European, elite, and, though Lily speaks Hebrew and "even looks the part," she "feels like a stranger, an outsider."

Her outsider status is related to her Mizrahi heritage, her having grown up in Canada, and her nascent queer sexuality. All of these identifying characteristics place Lily at the margins of Israeli society in different ways, much as the story itself, as a work of Israeli literature in English published in the diaspora, stands at the margins of Israeli culture. This kit offers resources related to both some of the major themes of the story—Mizrahi and queer identity in Israel—as well as the author's experience of writing in her second language.

Cover image: Photograph of Ayelet Tsabari by Jonathan Bloom

Subjects

Canada, Childhood, Fiction, Hebrew, Israel-Palestine, Mizrahi, Sexuality, Women Writers

Reading and Background

- The story "Say It Again, Say Something Else" can be found in Ayelet Tsabari's short story collection *The Best Place on Earth*, published in the U.S. by Random House. You can also read the [press release](#) announcing the 2015 Sami Rohr Prize for Jewish Literature, which was awarded to *The Best Place on Earth*.
- More information about Ayelet Tsabari, including her [bio](#), can be found on her web page. Tsabari has been the subject of many interviews, including [this one](#) from the April 2016 issue of *Lilith* magazine.
- For an analysis of Tsabari's work, including a discussion of "Say It Again, Say Something Else," consult "Hebrew in English: The New Transnational Hebrew Literature" by Melissa Weininger in the Summer 2015 issue of *Shofar*.
- Background on translingual literature, works written by authors in non-native languages, is available in Steven G. Kellman's *Switching Languages*.

Resources

1: Short story excerpt, Ayelet Tsabari's "Say It Again, Say Something Else," 2013.

This conversation between Lily, the story's protagonist, and Lana, her new friend and the object of her affection, occurs when Lana, waiting for the bus to the mall with Lily, suggests that they should get off the bus if they see someone who "looks suspicious," and then explains that anyone who looks Arab meets this criterion.



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Lana's insistence that her particular European heritage has been subsumed by a monolithic Israeli identity is at odds with Lily's insistence on the coexistence of dual identities, a debate that is at the heart of the story's exploration of the multivalence of Jewish identity, national identity, and sexual identity.

Suggested Activities: Have two students play Lily and Lana and read the excerpt aloud. Discuss the assertions that each girl makes in the passage. Can Arab and Jewish identities coexist? Why might Lana insist that her Belarusian heritage has been superseded by her Israeliness? What are the implications of each position? You may invite students to share any experiences they have had living with multiple identities. Were there particular moments when they felt they had to choose one identity?

For a more sophisticated class, divide the class into two teams, one representing Lana's position and one representing Lily's position. Ask the teams to use the text of the story to come up with a set of points in favor of each position, and to address any possible critiques of it. Allow the teams to engage in a brief debate about the validity of each position.

Source: Ayelet Tsabari, "Say It Again, Say Something Else." *The Best Place on Earth*. (New York: Random House, 2013), 40.

2: Speech excerpt, Ayelet Tsabari's Nili Adler Memorial Lecture, "Language, Longing, and Belonging," 2017.

In this speech, Ayelet Tsabari discusses some of the themes of her work and what it's like to write in her second language. This excerpt focuses on her personal background as an Israeli writer of Yemeni descent and the way that her background was underrepresented among the writers she read as a child, as well as in history classes and public life. She references a character from one of her stories, a young Israeli boy, Uri, of Iraqi descent, who hopes to be a writer one day but has no role models until he encounters the work of the Iraqi Hebrew poet Ronny Someck. Mizrahi people have always been underrepresented among Israeli poets and writers, as they have been in other areas of Israeli politics, art, and culture. The marginalization of Mizrahi culture in Israel is one of the central themes in "Say It Again," as well as in the rest of Tsabari's collection, *The Best Place on Earth*.

Suggested Activities: Ask students to think of examples from their own lives when they identified with a fictional character or historical figure. What made them feel connected to that character? Did that character or figure share their own cultural heritage or not? Did they ever feel that they were not being represented in the popular culture they were reading, watching, or listening to? How did they respond to that lack of identification?

Source: "Language, Longing, and Belonging: An Evening with Israeli Author Ayelet Tsabari," YouTube, May 15, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpMKSGnol3U>.

3: Essay excerpt, Jhumpa Lahiri's "Teach Yourself Italian," 2015.

Jhumpa Lahiri is an American writer whose parents immigrated to the United States from India. Much of her fiction is concerned with the themes of immigration and migration, family history and continuity, and cultural identity. Several years ago, after experiencing a great deal of success as a writer in America, Lahiri moved to Italy and made the decision to begin to write only in Italian. In this essay she explains that decision, what led to it, and why she thinks she chose such an unusual path forward. Like Tsabari, Lahiri made a conscious choice to write in a non-native language to which she had no familial or cultural connection.

Suggested Activities: Read the excerpt together. Explain Lahiri's family background and her decision to write in Italian. Discuss why a successful writer might make the choice to write in a second (or third) language. What are the advantages or disadvantages of writing in a language that is not native? What is the connection between English and Lahiri's relationship with her parents? How is this related to her understanding of her own translanguaging? What questions does Lahiri's quotation raise about why Tsabari might choose to write in English?

Source: Jhumpa Lahiri, "Teach Yourself Italian," *The New Yorker*, December 7, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/12/07/teach-yourself-italian>.

4: Essay excerpt, Ayelet Tsabari's "Why I Chose to Write in English," 2016.

Like Jhumpa Lahiri (see resource 3 of this kit), Ayelet Tsabari made the decision to write in her second language. Although her family background and history is very different from Lahiri's, many of Tsabari's observations about her choice to write in a second language are strikingly similar.

Suggested Activities: Consider this essay excerpt alongside both the excerpt from Lahiri's essay (resource 3) and the excerpt from "Say It Again" (resource 1). How does Tsabari's essay resemble Lahiri's and how does it differ? Are there aspects of her experience that are particular to her own background and identity? Are there aspects of her experience that are universal? And how does the character of Lily in the story reflect on some of the themes from Tsabari's and Lahiri's essays about language, identity, and cultural heritage?

Source: Ayelet Tsabari, "Why I Chose to Write in English," *LitHub*, March 23, 2016, <https://lithub.com/why-i-chose-to-write-in-english/>

5: Music video, A-WA's "Habib Galbi," 2015.

Israeli band A-WA (pronounced ai-wa, which is Arabic for "yes") is comprised of three Yemeni-Israeli sisters who combine electronic dance music with Yemenite women's chanting and folk songs. Raised in a village in southern Israel, these sisters embrace their dual heritage, singing in Arabic with a distinctly modern twist.

Suggested Activities: Watch the video, and ask students to point out the ways in which A-WA blends modern sounds, images, and stories with seemingly traditional ones. Which language are they singing in? What other evidence is there of the band's Arab identity? Is there also evidence in the video of the band's Jewish and Israeli identities? How does A-WA and its work relate to Lily's assertions about Arab-Jewish identity in "Say It Again"?

Source: A-WA. "A-WA - Habib Galbi - Official Video." *YouTube*, YouTube, 7 Mar. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=g3bjZlmsb4A.

6: Poem, Adi Keissar's "Black on Black" translated by Ayelet Tsabari, 2016.

Adi Keissar is an Israeli poet of Yemeni descent who is the founder of *Ars Poetica*, a literary movement that seeks to increase the visibility of Mizrahi artists and writers in Israel. The name "*Ars Poetica*" is both a nod to Horace's poem of the same title and a play on the Arabic word *ars*, meaning pimp, which is derogatory slang in Israel for Mizrahi men. Keissar's poem "Black on Black," originally written in Hebrew, addresses the themes of language, heritage, and family so central to "Say It Again," a connection made closer by the fact that Ayelet Tsabari created this translation of the poem into English.

Suggested Activities: First, read the poem once out loud while the class follows along with the text. Then ask the class to close their eyes and pay attention to their own thoughts and feelings as you read the poem out loud again. Ask students to offer any images, memories, ideas, thoughts, impressions, or feelings that the poem triggered in them. Use these as a blueprint for discussing the themes of language, family, continuity, and identity central to the poem. Allow students to discuss the way that the poem arouses their own personal connections to the very specific story about a young girl and her Yemeni grandmother. Ask students to draw connections between Keissar's poem and Tsabari's story and then to write their own poem or story in response to these two works they have read.

Source: Adi Keissar, "Black on Black" ("*Shachor al gabei shachor*"), trans. Ayelet Tsabari, *Lyrikline*, <https://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/12604#>