

Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy"

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/isaac-bashevis-singers-yentl-yeshiva-boy>.

Introduction

Isaac Bashevis Singer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978. His stories and novels, written in Yiddish, have been translated more widely and into more languages than any other Yiddish text. One of his most famous short stories, "Yentl, the Yeshiva Boy," is also well-known because of its (loose) film adaptation *Yentl*, starring, co-written, and co-produced by Barbra Streisand in 1983. The story appeared in English translation in 1962, a year before it was published in the original Yiddish.

The tale of a young woman who dresses as a man in order to study in a yeshiva, "Yentl" explores questions of identity, sexuality, and gender. Singer was controversial and famous—some would say infamous—for such stories of transgression. This resource kit allows teachers and students to understand the differences between the Yiddish story and the English translation, and between Singer's story and Streisand's film. The kit discusses religious and personal desires, and invites students to explore the differences between Eastern European and American Jewish cultures.

Cover image: The script cover for the 1974 play adaptation of *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy*, by Isaac Bashevis Singer and Leah Napolin. Image accessed on [Royal Books](#), March 7, 2019.

Subjects

Fiction, Film, Gender, Marriage, Religion, Sexuality, Yiddish, Translation

Reading and Background

- The story "Yentl der yeshive-bokher" first appeared in the Yiddish literary journal *Di goldene keyt* in 1963. The English translation "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy" was published in 1962, before the Yiddish original, in *Commentary* magazine. The full text of the story is [available on Commentary's website](#).
- The English translation of the story can be found in published collections of I.B. Singer's short stories, including *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* and *Collected Stories (Penguin Modern Classics)*. It was also published as a picture book in 1983 with woodcut illustrations by Antonio Frasconi.
- Psychoanalyst and Yiddish scholar Janet Hadda wrote *Isaac Bashevis Singer: A Life* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), a reliable biography of Singer. A shorter biography is available in the [YIVO encyclopedia](#).
- For comparisons of the Yiddish, English, and film versions of "Yentl," see Chapter 3 in Anita Norich's *Writing in Tongues* (University of Washington Press, 2014), especially pages 58-65.
- Naomi Seidman discusses cross-dressing in "The Erotics of Sexual Segregation," *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism* (NYU Press, 2009), ed. Danya Ruttenberg.
- Famous women who studied Talmud, including Bruriah and the Maid of Ludomir, are discussed in Daniel Boyarin's *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (University of California Press, 1995), pages 167-96.

Resources

1: Film stills, "Yentl," dir. Barbra Streisand, 1983.

The *Yentl* story hinges on Yentl's ability to "pass" as a man. In order to enter yeshiva (Jewish seminary), Anshel (the masculine name that Yentl takes) must be perceived as male.



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Suggested Activity: Show still photos from Streisand's film to students. Discuss how the transition from female to male is revealed in the story and in the movie. Is Streisand "convincing" as a male? Why or why not? Discuss cross-dressing from male to female or female to male. Students may be familiar with racial passing. Cross-dressing, too, can be a form of passing. Have students consider other forms of passing and why people might wish to alter their outward identities. What is gained or lost in passing?

Source: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Inc. 1983. *Yentl*. Images. Accessed October 25, 2018. IMDb.com, Inc.

2: Dictionary definitions, and excerpts, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," Isaac Bashevis Singer, 1962.

Scholar Naomi Seidman considers complex sexual and gender dynamics in her chapter "The Erotics of Sexual Segregation," in *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism*: "The traditional world offered a wide range of same-sex [homosocial] environments, each with its distinctive patterns of interaction, class or religious associations, and so on. Male domains such as yeshivas, study halls, bathhouses, synagogues, and the Hasidic court were all part of a ramified, single-sex socio-religious culture that supplemented, indeed sometimes supplanted, the mixed-sex spaces of home and marketplace" (Seidman, 111). In "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," I.B. Singer engages many of these dynamics, exploring traditional same-sex spaces of interaction like the yeshiva. Defining key terms relevant to the interactions in "Yentl," and applying them to the text, can create pathways into the story for students.

Suggested Activity: Have students consult the provided dictionary definitions of "homosocial," "homoerotic," and "homosexual." Ask if (and, if so, how) any of these terms help them to understand the sexual or gender dynamics in the story.

Sources: Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary copyright © 2015 by Merriam-Webster, Incorporated.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," *Commentary* vol. 34, no. 3 (Sept. 1962), 213-24. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/yentl-the-yeshiva-boy-a-story/>

3: "Freedom for Agunot" newspaper insert, 1993.

According to *halakha* (Jewish law), marriages can only be dissolved if a husband grants a *get* (a divorce) and the wife accepts it. Women whose husbands will not grant them a *get* or whose husbands cannot be located are called *agunot*, literally "chained wives" who cannot re-marry. The term *agunah* (the singular of *agunot*) is frequently translated into English as "grass widow."

After Yentl reveals her hidden identity to Avigdor, they contemplate whether Yentl/Anshel can grant a *get* to Hadass, so that she will not become an *agunah* if and when Yentl/Anshel leaves her. In the end, Yentl/Anshel sends Hadass divorce papers.

While this scenario may seem unique to the early twentieth-century Eastern European context of "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," it is not. Published in *The Jewish Week* in 1993, the newspaper insert in this resource was created by two *agunah* advocacy organizations, Agunah Inc. and GET. Today, activists are still working to raise awareness about the plight of *agunot* in Jewish communities around the world.

Suggested Activity: Discuss marriage laws and the plight of the *agunah* (abandoned wife) in Jewish life. What are the ethical implications of the laws? How do they affect the characters in "Yentl"? Invite the students to look at the newspaper insert. What do they find interesting about the flyer? What does it tell them about the experiences of the *agunot*?

Source: "Freedom for Agunot" flyer. Agunah Inc. and GET, 1993. Accessed on Jewish Women's Archive, October 24, 2018. <https://jwa.org/media/freedom-for-agunot-flyer>.

4: Short story excerpts, I.B. Singer's "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," Yiddish, 1963, and English translation, 1962.

In Yiddish, masculine pronouns are ער (*er*, him,) אים (*im*, him,) and זײַן (*zayn*, his.) Feminine pronouns are זי (*zi*, she) and איר (*ir*, her, hers.) The underlined words in the excerpts show the changes from masculine pronouns in the Yiddish story to feminine pronouns in the English story.

Suggested Activity: Ask students why they think the pronouns are changed from masculine in the Yiddish to feminine in the

English translation. What effect does this change have? Singer always authorized the translations of his texts. Why might he have allowed this change?

Sources: Isaac Bashevis, "Yentl der yeshive-bokher," *Di goldene keyt*, 46 (1963), 91-110.

Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," *Commentary* vol. 34, no. 3 (Sept. 1962), 213-24.

<https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/yentl-the-yeshiva-boy-a-story/>

5: Short story excerpt, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," 1962.

Streisand's film adaptation diverges from the original short story (and from I.B. Singer and Leah Napolin's Broadway play adaptation) in key ways. The wedding night scene in the film, for example, presents a different narrative about the marriage and its consummation than the short story.

Suggested Activity: Compare the wedding night scene in the film (7 minutes, about 1:19:00 to 1:25:57), and the passage from the story. Discuss why Streisand might have removed the consummation scene and substituted a scene of drunkenness and spilled wine. Do the students perceive Yentl differently as a character in the story passage and in the film scene? Ask students how they might have filmed this scene themselves.

Source: Isaac Bashevis Singer, "Yentl the Yeshiva Boy," *Commentary* vol. 34, no. 3 (Sept. 1962), 213-24.

<https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/yentl-the-yeshiva-boy-a-story/>

6: Excerpt from film review, "I.B. Singer Talks to I.B. Singer about the Movie 'Yentl'," 1984.

Singer published a scathing review (in the style of a self-interview) of Streisand's film adaptation in the *New York Times*.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to write their own review of the film. Invite them to discuss their reviews with the class. After they have done so, ask them to read [the review](#) that I.B. Singer wrote, and focus particularly on this excerpt. Ask students: do you think Singer is fair to the film? Why do you think he disliked it so much?

Source: Isaac Bashevis Singer, "I.B. Singer Talks to I.B. Singer about the Movie 'Yentl,'" *New York Times*, January 29, 1984,

<https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/04/27/reviews/streisand-singer.html?mcubz=0>

7: Source sheet, Bruriah, and cover art and text, Gershon Winkler's "They Called Her Rebbe: the Maiden of Ludomir," 1990.

The "Yentl" story centers on the belief that the study of Torah is antithetical to a woman's role in Judaism; yet, women throughout history have rejected a dichotomy of male and female roles, and have studied Torah. Bruriah and the Maid of Ludomir are two examples of women who did so. An article about [Bruriah](#) is available on Jewish Encyclopedia. An article about the [Maid of Ludomir](#) is available on the Jewish Women's Archive.

Suggested Activity: Ask students to read the excerpts from the sources, and invite them to think about why Torah study was often considered taboo for women. Point to the famous women in the sources who challenged this view. Consulting the Bruriah source sheet, ask the students about the portrayal of a woman studying Torah. How do they characterize Bruriah (spelled Berurya in the passage)? Then ask them to consider the book cover. What do they notice about it? How does it depict a woman who studied Torah in the 19th century (like Yentl)? Discuss ways in which gender roles and expectations have and have not changed since Singer wrote the story (published in English in 1962) and since Streisand adapted it (released in 1983).

Sources: "Bruriah" Source Sheet created in Sefaria. *Pesakhim 62b: 9-10*. English from The William Davidson digital edition of the Koren Noé Talmud, with commentary by Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz.

Norman, Nodel. 1990, *They Called Her Rebbe: The Maiden of Ludomir*, Gershon Winkler, Judaica Press, Inc., 1990, front cover.