

Nathan Englander's "The Gilgul of Park Avenue"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/nathan-englanders-gilgul-park-avenue>.

Introduction

Nathan Englander's "The Gilgul of Park Avenue" appeared in his debut collection of short stories, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, published in 1999. This collection of stories, filled with a diverse cast of Jewish characters, signaled Englander's arrival in the literary world as a master storyteller and in the American Jewish world as a singular voice capable, perhaps, of taking the baton from the likes of Bernard Malamud and Cynthia Ozick. His third book, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank*, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2012.

This story, in which a non-Jewish Manhattanite suddenly has the bizarre epiphany that he is Jewish, raises many questions about personal identity, the fragility of relationships during moments of transition, and the ineffable mystery of the soul.

This kit offers resources meant to a) provide background on some of the Jewish concepts embedded in the story, and b) spark questions and points of discussion about Englander's piece.

Cover image: This untitled illustration by Turkish artist Gürbüz D. Eksioğlu appeared alongside Nathan Englander's story "The Gilgul of Park Avenue," when it was first published in *The Atlantic* in 1999.

Subjects

Fiction, Kabbalah, Marriage, Metaphysics, New York, Religion, United States

Reading and Background:

- The full story is available online at [The Atlantic](#) or in Englander's collection *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*. An audio version of the story, read by Paul Michael, is available for purchase via [Audible](#) or [iTunes](#).
- The Brooklyn-based Englander has published several novels and short story collections, for which he has received numerous recognitions and awards. A short, professional biography is available on [his website](#). A more personal exploration of Englander's trajectory from an Orthodox upbringing to his "culturally Jewish" secularism can be found in this [New York profile](#).
- This short story narratively plays with the idea of gilgul (גילגול), which is the Kabbalistic notion of reincarnation or the transmigration of souls. For background on this concept and its historical development (as well as its absence in rabbinic Judaism), reference these online entries in [Jewish Virtual Library](#) and [Jewish Encyclopedia](#).

Resources

1: Gürbüz D. Eksioğlu's untitled illustration for Nathan Englander's story "The Gilgul of Park Avenue," in "The Atlantic," 1999.

This print by the renowned Turkish illustrator, [Gürbüz D. Eksioğlu](#), accompanied "The Gilgul of Park Avenue" when it was first published in the March 1999 issue of *The Atlantic*. It recalls the very first paragraph of Englander's story:

The Jewish day begins in the calm of evening, when it won't shock the system with its arrival. That was when, three stars visible in the Manhattan sky and a new day fallen, Charles Morton Luger understood that he was the bearer of a Jewish soul.



The Great Jewish Books Teacher Workshop, a program of the Yiddish Book Center, is made possible with support from the Jim Joseph Foundation. The Foundation, established in 2006, is devoted to fostering compelling, effective Jewish learning experiences for youth and young adults in the U.S.

Suggested Activity: Before showing students Eksioglu's illustration, ask them to consider what part of the story they would choose to depict if hired to create an illustration which would accompany it in a major magazine. (For a more extensive assignment, have students actually create illustrations.) Then, ask students to consider why Eksioglu might have focused upon this moment in the story for his illustration. Do they feel that the image, with its particular style and perspective, represents the story well? What might the three stars in the backseat window, already present in the night sky, represent?

Source: Gürbüz D. Eksioglu, untitled illustration for Nathan Englander's "The Gilgul of Park Avenue," *The Atlantic* (March 1999).

2: Pew Research Center's "Who is a Jew?" sidebar to its "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" survey, 2013.

The classic question—*Who is a Jew?*—was systematically explored by the Pew Research Center before it embarked on its massive "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" survey in 2013. Pew's exploration of that question can be read in its entirety in the survey's sidebar.

This excerpt and graph together encapsulate how Pew addressed and answered the question, "Who is a Jew?"

Suggested Activity: Ask students to consider what it means to be a Jew. Who gets to decide? What criteria should be considered? How do students define or describe their own Jewish identity? Then, have students consider how Pew answered the question "Who is a Jew?" before turning that question on Englander's story. In "The Gilgul of Park Avenue," how is Jewish identity decided, and how does that coincide with or differ from students' own ideas or the ideas of the Pew Research Center?

Source: "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" survey sidebar. Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C. (2013). <http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-cul...>

3: Text excerpt from Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's "Gilgul" in "The New Yorker," 2011.

The Jewish idea of reincarnation, or *gilgul*, was developed in mystical, Kabbalistic texts nearly 1,000 years ago and has evolved ever since. During that evolution, it has become a point of fascination for artists, scholars and mystics alike. One such writer who became taken with the idea is Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, the famed Jewish historian who wrote **only one piece of fiction** in his life: **a short story called "Gilgul"** in which the main character, a scholar named Ravitch, visits a fortune-teller to learn the fate of his soul. In the excerpt below, the fortune-teller, Gerda, asks Ravitch what he knows about *gilgul*.

Suggested Activity: Before diving into Yerushalmi's excerpt, give students the chance to simply share their ideas about the soul. Does it even exist? And if so, what is the soul anyway? After sharing the excerpt, ask students to explore the linguistic relationship between גלגל (*galgal* – wheel) and גלגול (*gilgul* – reincarnation). Then, address the essential question lurking beneath everything: supposing reincarnation exists, for what purpose does it exist? Ask students how they feel about Ravitch's opinion that the idea of reincarnation exists as "a give-me-another-chance" doctrine. Do they connect with such an idea? Or does it seem too utilitarian or practical?

Source: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, "Gilgul," *The New Yorker* (August 15, 2011).

4: Text excerpt from Saadia Gaon's "The Book of Beliefs & Opinions," 933 C.E.

Englander portrays the concept of *gilgul* as a New Age, fringe notion via the character of Zalman. And for good reason. Indeed, the concept of *gilgul* **has never been a mainstream idea** in Rabbinic Judaism since its inception. This can be seen clearly in Saadia Gaon's philosophical treatise defending Rabbinic Judaism, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*—written in Judeo-Arabic—which is perhaps the first systematic attempt in Jewish history to define Jewish beliefs using philosophical principles.

Suggested Activity: Before exploring Saadia Gaon's excerpt, ask students if there are any beliefs which would exclude a person from the larger Jewish community. (Possibilities for discussion could include a belief in Christ or anti-Zionist beliefs.) Then, read the excerpt and ask students how they feel about Saadia Gaon's opinion. Should religious or political ideas ever make someone non-Jewish in the eyes of others?

Source: Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs & Opinions*, Yale Judaica Series, Volume I, Chapter VIII, pg. 259 (1989).

5: Text excerpt on the term “marrano” from Joshua Teplitsky’s essay in *My Jewish Learning*.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, **pogroms and anti-Jewish decrees** on the Iberian Peninsula led to the murder of tens of thousands of Jews as well as to the forced conversion and/or expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Spanish and Portuguese Jews.

This excerpt briefly explains the concept of “marrano” in this historical context. The term appears in “The Gilgul of Park Avenue” when the narrator, referencing Charles at the beginning of his Jewish awakening, describes him in this way:

And so, a marrano in modern times, Charles ate his chicken like a gentile—all the while a Jew in his heart.

Suggested Activity: After reading the excerpt, ask students why the narrator describes Charles as a “marrano in modern times” given the term’s historical context. Do students think the analogy works? Or do students find Englander’s use of “marrano” problematic or even offensive given its traumatic origins?

Source: Joshua Teplitsky, “Crypto-Jews,” *My Jewish Learning*, accessed February 26, 2019. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/crypto-jews/>

6: Text excerpt from “‘Crypto-Jews’ In The Southwest Find Faith In A Shrouded Legacy,” via NPR’s “Code Switch,” 2014.

Some scholars believe that populations of crypto-Jews—the academic term for *marranos*—fled the Iberian Peninsula and eventually settled along the Mexican border near Texas and New Mexico. Today, those in New Mexico who claim to be descendants of crypto-Jews are reclaiming their Jewishness as they understand anew rituals which echo Jewish laws and customs uncommon in normative Christian practice.

This excerpt explores the rituals, and the contemporary awakening, of people living in the Southwest of the United States who claim to be descendants of crypto-Jews.

Suggested Activity: First, ask students to compare the awakening of crypto-Jews in the Southwest with Charles’s epiphany in “The Gilgul of Park Avenue.” How do they differ? Then, ask students to consider Loya’s statement that “[t]here’s something about it, deep within our souls.” Why might Loya be invoking the soul? Why would someone discovering a Jewish lineage, talk about the soul, rather than about peoplehood or culture? Is there such thing as a Jewish soul?

Source: Wyatt Orme, “Crypto-Jews’ In The Southwest Find Faith In A Shrouded Legacy,” NPR’s *Code Switch*, February 19, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/02/19/275862633/crypto-jews....> Accessed February 26, 2019.