"A Close Encounter with Steven Spielberg" (PAGES 6–7)

LESSON PLAN BY TRACY GUREN KLIRS

Being Jewish was unimportant to filmmaker Steven Spielberg until the birth of his first child suddenly ignited in him a desire to raise his children as Jews. In this lesson students will analyze why contemporary Jews often drift away from Jewish life. Students will also affirm the positive elements that anchor Jewish identity, and explore what it means to "return" to Judaism.

CONCEPTS AND OBJECTIVES

- Students will compare Steven Spielberg's experiences to their own by sharing pivotal moments in the formation of their own Jewish identities.
- Students will brainstorm the various "pulls" toward complete assimilation in their lives, and counter those with a list of positive factors "pulling" them into Judaism.
- Students will relate Spielberg's personal Jewish journey to the concept of *teshuvah*, focusing on its root meaning of "return."

KEY QUOTES AND QUESTIONS

"I felt like I was the only Jew in high school. I just simply wanted to deny being Jewish.... I felt very alien. I was ashamed.... I so much wanted to be assimilated."

Are there situations in your life (e.g., school, sports team, camp) where you are in a tiny minority as a Jew?

Do these situations make you feel alien and ashamed, as young Steven Spielberg felt, or do they strengthen your feelings of Jewishness?

"When my son, Max, was born, it greatly affected me. A spirit began to ignite in me, and I became a Jewish dad at the moment of birth and circumcision.... I really made a decision at that point that I wanted to raise my children as Jews.... I had been so ashamed of being a Jew, and now I'm filled with pride."

Why do you think the birth of his son had such a powerful effect on Spielberg?

Has there been a similar moment in your life when you suddenly felt very proud of being Jewish?

MOTIVATION AND DEVELOPMENT

1. Before reading the article, ask students to name some famous people who are Jewish. Write their names on the board. If Steven Spielberg's name is mentioned, circle it; if not, add it, pointing out that today we're going to learn about Spielberg and the role Judaism plays in his life. Ask for volunteers to play the roles of Spielberg, narrator, and interviewer. Have them read the interview on pages 6–7 of BabagaNewz as readers' theater. (The narrator reads the opening paragraphs before the interview, and the interviewer and Spielberg read their parts.) You may want to use props for this reading activity—a fake microphone, a baseball cap for Spielberg, etc.

2. Use the key quotes and questions to generate discussion. After discussing whether being in a small minority is more likely to make you feel alien and ashamed, or confident in and proud of your Jewish identity, focus on Spielberg's statement that, as a kid, he "so much wanted to be assimilated." Elicit a definition for assimilated.

Instruct the students to work in pairs to brainstorm all the things in their lives and society that "pull" them toward becoming totally assimilated (e.g., TV, movies, peer pressure, wanting to fit in). Then have them think of all the things that pull them toward Judaism (e.g., family, favorite Jewish holidays, Jewish friends, camp, etc.). Students can record their ideas on the worksheet available to print online at www.babaganewz.com/teachers. As students share their responses, list the pulls to assimilation on the left side of the board and the pulls to Judaism on the right.

Note that in the interview Spielberg says that he had no JCC and no Jewish friends. Ask the students:

If Spielberg had more of the things listed on the right side of the board when he was growing up, might his earlier attitude toward Judaism have been different?

3. Allow the students to finish responding to the rest of the questions. When they get to the question about their own moments of suddenly connecting with Judaism, erase the left side of the board and write their responses on the board. Review the responses and ask them what kind of picture of Judaism these "peak event" responses, together with what's on the right side of the board, reveal.

Ask the students if they remember what Spielberg said about the change he felt when his son was born.

Why do you think that he refers to that moment as a spark?

What are the characteristics of a spark?

What is the product of a spark? How does this product relate to Judaism?

Study the *Ezekiel* text and ask the follow-up questions.

4. Ask the students:

Do you think it is enough for a Jewish person to have one or two great peak experiences to cultivate positive feelings about Judaism? Why or why not?

Let's look again at Spielberg's life. Did his Jewish awakening end with the birth of his first child? [Refer to the article—he continues to make an effort to learn more about Judaism, he directed and produced *Schindler's List* and founded the Shoah Foundation and the Righteous Persons Foundation.]

Now put the word תְּשׁוּבָה (*teshuvah*) on the board and ask for definitions. Ask whether the students think this word has anything to do with Steven Spielberg's life. Now tell the students we're going to look at another famous quote—one so famous that they may even know it by heart. Ask the students who recognize the song to join with you as you begin singing *Hashiveinu* to the Torah service tune. Then pass out the *Lamentations* text and translation, review the translation and analysis, and have the students answer the questions.

5. To conclude the lesson ask students to:

Imagine that a major Jewish organization is launching a "Come Back Home to Judaism" campaign. The organization is running a contest to see who can design the best poster for its campaign. Using some of the ideas generated in this lesson, design and create such a poster using paints, markers, collage technique, or other media.

JEWISH TEXTS

Ezekiel 18:31

Make you a new heart and a new spirit; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Spielberg spoke of suddenly having "a spirit...ignite in me" when his son was born, which sounds like the "new heart and new spirit" spoken of by Ezekiel.

How do you understand the phrases a new heart and a new spirit? What is the difference between a heart and a spirit?

Why do you think that God mandates that both should be renewed?

What are steps someone could take to make a new heart and spirit?

Who is the "house of Israel" to which the text refers?

Do you think it is true that the "house of Israel" would die without this new heart and new spirit?

What do you think would happen to the American Jewish community if most Jews were like Spielberg before he reclaimed his Judaism?

Lamentations 5:21 and the Torah Service

Turn us to You, O God, and we shall be turned. Renew our days as of old.

The words הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ (*hashiveinu*, turn us) and נָשׁוּבָה (*nashuva*, we shall be turned) are formed from the root ש.ו.ב. *sh-u-v*. The word תְּשׁוּבָה (*teshuvah)*, this month's theme, is often translated as "repentance" but really implies turning away from the negative and toward the positive, or returning to our true path.

What are we asking to be turned to in this source? Why?

Why do you think that the verse includes both the words *hashiveinu* and *nashuvah*? What is the difference? Can God in fact make us return to God, or is that something we must do for ourselves?

A person who abandons Jewish practice and then does *teshuvah* and becomes fully observant is called a *ba'al/ba'alat teshuvah*. Do you think that Steven Spielberg is a *ba'al teshuvah*? Why or why not?

FOLLOW-UP AND ENRICHMENT

Find a relative or friend who "returned" to Judaism after having lived a fairly secular life. Interview this person about his or her motivations, etc., and bring your results back to class.

RELATED WEB SITES/ADDITIONAL SOURCES

The official web site of Steven Spielberg's Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation
www.vhf.org

Stories by Sonia Levitin, Carol Matas, and others that will make students laugh, cry, and think about what it means to be a Jew, available to purchase from www.bababookz.com.

With all my Heart, With all my Mind: Thirteen Stories About Growing Up Jewish, edited by Sandy Asher.

VOCABULARY FOR YOUR STUDENTS

הִתְבּוֹלְלוּת	assimilation
בַּעַל/בַּעֲלַת תְּשׁוּבָה	"repentant," someone who returns to Judaism (m/f)
הַעֲרָכָה עַצְמִית	self-esteem
זֶהוּת יְהוּדִית	Jewish identity