Letters from Rifka
Study Guide

I. INTRODUCTION

This study guide aims to provide material to help in the preparation of a lesson, unit, or book-club discussion about the novel *Letters from Rifka* by Karen Hesse. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the value *tikvah*, hope, the theme of the *Shevat* 5764 issue of BABAGANEWZ.

Twelve-year-old Rifka tells the story of her journey from Berdichev, Russia to New York City through letters that she writes to her cousin back in her hometown. Rifka's journey is a difficult one in which Rifka suffers losses, but still never loses hope for a better future. Under the specter of anti-Semitism, Rifka and her family escape from Russia in hopes of reaching the United States. Typhus ravages the family and postpones their travel, but ringworm is what eventually keeps Rifka from immigrating with her parents and brothers. All alone, Rifka battles to find the courage she needs to overcome her illness and rejoin her family in their new home.

To help plan for the study of the novel, this guide offers:

- questions for study and discussion
- passages for close analysis
- lesson ideas
- writing activities
- projects

Combine any components of the guide to help shape your lessons on the novel. You may also want to use the ideas in the guide as a means of offering enrichment and extra credit to students who wish to read the novel.

II. QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Over the course of what years does the novel take place? What world event occurred right before the start of this novel?

2. Why do you think that the author chose to write the story through letters that Rifka does not think she will ever send? What is the power in having Rifka write the story to her cousin Tovah? Do you think that the fact that Rifka plans to mail her little book to Tovah at the end of the novel adds to or detracts from the effect of the letter writing?

3. What is the relationship between Rifka and her brother Saul? Do you think that this relationship changes as the book unfolds? Why or why not?

4. Page 8 includes the first reference to Rifka's ability to learn languages. Why is this such an important skill for Rifka? In what other instances does this skill benefit her in the novel?

5. Rifka uses the word "clever" to describe her cousin Tovah. Why do you think Rifka places such an emphasis on cleverness? Do you think Rifka is clever? How do you know?

6. Throughout the novel, Rifka acts as a nurse for others. What are examples of this behavior? What quality of Rifka's does this highlight?

7. On different occasions, Rifka encounters doctors on her journey. What is her attitude toward doctors? How does her attitude change?

8. On pages 64-65, Rifka describes the kindness of a milkman she meets in Antwerp. Why do you think that this incident has such a great impact on her?

9. Compare the way Rifka writes about Russia and Poland to the way she writes about Belgium and America. What types of words does she use to describe the Eastern European countries? How do those differ from the way she describes Antwerp and New York? How do the words she uses reflect her feelings about the different places?

10. On her passage across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States, Rifka meets a sailor named Pieter. What does Rifka learn about herself from her friendship with Pieter?

11. Why is Rifka detained at Ellis Island even if her ringworm had been cured? Do you agree with or understand Mr. Fargate's reasoning? Why or why not?

12. Look at Rifka's original English poem that she writes on Ellis Island (page 140). What does this poem teach the reader about Rifka's journey? What does it reveal about Rifka?

13. Rifka demonstrates an amazing capacity for hope throughout the novel. What inspires her to be hopeful? What internal qualities does Rifka possess that make her capable of hope? What external role models inspire her to be hopeful?

14. While this novel does focus on *tikvah*, hope, it also includes numerous other Jewish values. What are other examples of Jewish values evident in the novel? Which Jewish value do you think is most important to the novel?

III. PASSAGES FOR CLOSE ANALYSIS

1. Page 23:

   "I remember very little, Tovah, but I do remember that. Those words cut through the fever and the pain. When I heard them, I wished I would die. If I died, I would be free from my suffering.

   But if I died, I would never reach America."

What does America represent for Rifka? How does the thought of America propel her actions through the novel?

2. Page 40:
   "But then at other times I am so glad to be who I am. Rifka Nebrot. Only daughter and youngest child of Ethel and Beryl Nebrot. Baby sister of Isaac and Asher and Reuben and Nathan and Saul. Traveling forward—to America.
   When I think of myself that way, even though we are homeless and our lives are in danger even now, still I believe everything will turn out well."

   Why does Rifka remind herself who she is? How does this knowledge help her have hope?

3. Page 54:
   "Early on the morning of my birthday, I crept down the stairs and took broken straws from the kitchen broom. Back in my room, I wove the stars into a Star of David, a fragile golden Star of David… Later, I place my Star of David between the pages of our Pushkin…"

   Why is this straw *Magen David* so important to Rifka? What does it represent to her?

4. Page 73:
   "So I bought my ticket on a ship that has no classes. All the people traveling to America on this ship are equal. It is very democratic. 'Democratic' is one of the words the lady from the HIAS taught me."

   Why does Rifka want to travel on a democratic ship? Why do you think that this is one of the first English words taught to her?

5. Page 91:
   "P.S. As I was finishing this letter a cry went up from the deck. When I went out to see what it was, I found all the passengers gathered on one side of the ship, looking up. They were looking at Miss Liberty, Tovah, a great statue of a woman standing in the middle of the harbor. She was lifting a lamp to light the way for us."

   How does Rifka regard the Statue of Liberty? Why do you think this is such an emotional moment for Rifka? Have you ever been to visit, or have you seen the Statue of Liberty? What were your thoughts/feelings at the time?

6. Page 100:
   "Then I knew. The boy was a peasant. A Russian peasant. Here, sitting before me, Tovah, was the reason we had fled our homeland. He was the reason for my being alone for so long, separated from my family. The reason I had typhus. The reason I had lost my hair. The reason Uncle Zeb was dead and all your lives were in danger."

   Why is this Rifka's initial reaction to Ilya? How does her subsequent behavior toward Ilya demonstrate her maturity and growth?

IV. LESSON IDEAS

1. Hang a world map in front of the class. On slips of paper, write the names of the cities and countries along Rifka's journey (Berdichev, Ukraine; Motziv, Poland (now Matsiov/Lukov, Ukraine); Warsaw, Poland; Antwerp, Belgium; Atlantic Ocean; Ellis Island; Manhattan). Divide the class into pairs or groups of three and ask each group to select a slip of paper from a bowl or hat. Once assigned a location, each group of students should research three interesting facts about the place. When called upon, the groups of students should locate the city on the world map; designate the location with a map pin, push pin, or marking of some sort; and share the three interesting facts they learned about the location. Once all groups have presented, your class can then map Rifka's journey. To culminate the lesson, remind students that Rifka's journey was not only a physical one: Rifka grew and changed along the route to America. Working in the same groups as for the previous activity, students will now create a life map for Rifka. Using the world map as a model, each group should design a map that tracks Rifka's growth and change from place to place, month to month, as she travels through the various locations in the novel. As these life maps are meant to be symbolic, students need not worry about scale or precise lines; rather, they should concern themselves with depicting the effect that each location has on Rifka. Instruct students to draw a symbolic map on a piece of poster board and use an appropriate marking or graphic to symbolize Rifka's growth at a particular location. Allow time for each group to present its map and display Rifka's life maps in your classroom.

2. Rifka's hometown of Berdichev has a rich Jewish history. Begin a study of the novel by exploring that history and discussing the structure of a *shtetl* with your students. The word *shtetl* is used to describe a small Jewish town or village formerly found in Eastern Europe. The following link includes a brief history of Berdichev and numerous resources about that *shtetl*: www.shtetlinks.jewishgen.org/berdichev/berdichev1.html

   In addition to the rich history of Hassidism in Berdichev, that town and other *shtetls* in Eastern Europe were victim to horrors of pogroms. Provide students with a definition of the word "pogrom" and a brief explanation of the history of pogroms. Then, read excerpts from Hayyim Nachman Bialik's famed poem, "In the City of Slaughter" (www.history.umd.edu/Faculty/BCooperman/NewCity/Slaughter.html), which he wrote after hearing eyewitness testimony to the 1903 Kishinev pogroms. Note that the poem is unrelenting in its graphic detail, so choose excerpts appropriate for your class. Ask students to identify points in the novel where Rifka mentions pogroms. How did the pogroms in Eastern Europe drive immigration to the United States? What role did they play in Rifka's family's immigration?

3. Two different diseases afflict Rifka: typhus and ringworm. Instruct students to write a description of each disease using the information provided in the novel. Then, direct them to the Internet or encyclopedia to flesh out their descriptions, which should include:
   - how the disease is contracted
   - the symptoms of the disease
   - the treatment of the disease

the length of illness
the severity of the disease
long-term effects of the disease

4. Rifka receives a gift from her cousin Tovah that accompanies her throughout her journey to America, a book of poetry by the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. Each chapter in the novel, in fact, begins with a quotation from a Pushkin poem. These selections mirror Rifka's personality, the time of year, or events that take place in the chapter. Divide the class into groups and assign one or two chapters to each group. Ask the groups to explore how the poem excerpt at the head of the chapter fits the tone, mood, or theme of the chapter. Then, instruct students to hunt for a Jewish text or quotation that could also serve as an appropriate introduction for the chapter. To start them off on their hunt, you may choose to provide the texts included in the Shevat BabagaNewz Teachers' Guide or any of the department quotes found at the top of each article in BabagaNewz—or you may direct them to a Concordance for Jewish texts or a book of Jewish quotations.

5. As a class, have students compile a list of the vocabulary in the novel that is unfamiliar. Create a class glossary of terms important to the novel.

6. Bring bananas, oranges, chocolate, and ice cream to class. These are foods that Rifka encounters for the first time on her journey to America. As students taste these foods, ask them to imagine what it would be like if this were the first time they ever tasted the foods. Then, ask them to discuss their memories of tasting a new food for the first time. What was the experience like?

   As a companion activity, ask students to conduct a "retrospective taste test" of foods from "the old country." By asking grandparents, older relatives and friends, or through research, compile a list of foods from long ago or far away that students may never have eaten. Try to obtain these foods or make them together as a class. Discuss:
   How do these foods taste? What stories did relatives or friends tell that accompany these foods? Why do you think food is such a powerful memory maker?

V. WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. Ask students to imagine Tovah's receipt of the book of Pushkin poetry filled with Rifka's letters to her. Have students compose Tovah's response to the year's worth of letters.

2. Rifka is clearly a writer at heart. Instruct students to write other letters to Tovah about her experiences in America.

3. Assuming Rifka's persona, students write "I am" poems. The format for "I am" poems is found in Appendix A to this guide.

VI. PROJECTS

1. Make an artistic timeline of the events of the novel, including dates and descriptions of each significant event.

2. In the Author's Note that appears in the book, Karen Hesse describes how she gleaned information about her family's immigration to the United States from her aunt. Encourage students to go on similar fact-finding missions about their families. Instruct them to locate the oldest living family member who knows a story about how and when the family came to the United States. They should interview the person and write a brief sketch of the person or of the family history that they learn. If applicable, students may choose to write "I am" poems about the interviewee as well.

   If a student learns that his or her family immigrated to the United States through Ellis Island, direct them to the Ellis Island web site, where they may be able to locate records of the person's arrival, including the ship manifest on which the person's name is recorded.

   For information about locations abroad from which Jewish families immigrated, visit www.jewishgen.org. The site includes information about many different places of origin worldwide.

3. A "keeping quilt" is a patchwork quilt made up of fabric from clothes that are especially important to a family's or person's heritage. Many immigrants made keeping quilts to maintain a memory of the places, people, and events that shaped them. Ask students to design a keeping quilt for Rifka. What fabrics would they include in her keeping quilt? Why?

   After they finish thinking of parts of Rifka's keeping quilt, ask students to consider what they would include if they were to make their own keeping quilts. What parts of family history and individual growth could they include? How would they represent the important people and events with fabric? Instruct students to create poster-size sketches of their individual keeping quilts. The sketches should include 1" or 2" squares to represent the different fabrics that would be included. For each patch of "fabric" sketched, they should include a key that describes the relevance of the fabric that can hang on the wall next to the quilt.

4. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, families had the custom of filling hope chests for the young girls in their families. Hope chests were a place for families to collect items that would eventually help the young woman in her new home when she would marry. Instruct students to imagine that Rifka and her family were filling a hope chest for her. Working in groups of three or four, students should collect the items (real or drawn by them) that they think Rifka and her family would include. When they present their hope chest to the rest of the class, groups must explain why the items included would be important for Rifka to have.

Appendix A

How to Write an I Am Poem

I Am

I am (two special characteristics)
I wonder (something you are actually curious about)
I hear (an imaginary sound)
I see (an imaginary sight)
I want (an actual desire)
I am (the first line of the poem restated)

I pretend (something you actually pretend to do)
I feel (a feeling about something imaginary)
I touch (an imaginary touch)
I worry (something that really bothers you)
I cry (something that makes you very sad)
I am (the first line of the poem repeated)

I understand (something you know is true)
I say (something you believe in)
I dream (something you actually dream about)
I try (something you really make an effort about)
I hope (something you actually hope for)
I am (the first line of the poem repeated)