My Guardian Angel
Study Guide

I. Introduction:

This study guide provides material to help in the preparation of a lesson, unit, or book-club discussion about the novel *My Guardian Angel* by Sylvie Weil. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the concept *Talmud Torah* addressed in the *Kislev* issue of BABAGANEWZ.

My Guardian Angel:

The streets are eerily empty, and everyone in the Jewish community is terrified of Peter the Hermit. His men, the Crusaders, are moving through the town on their way to the Holy Land. They have been known to batter down doors and burn Jewish houses, all in the name of religion.

This is not Nazi Germany, but Troyes, France, in 1096, as seen through the eyes of funny, feisty, 12-year-old Elvina. She is the granddaughter of the great rabbi and Torah scholar known as Rashi, and she knows how to read and write—which is very rare for a girl of her time. She draws strength from this, as well as from her Guardian Angel, to whom she speaks constantly.

On a cold Sabbath afternoon while Elvina is alone in the house, three soldiers pound at her door. One of them is wounded. Elvina has only a moment to make a difficult choice that could put her family and the entire community at risk. Can her Guardian Angel guide her and keep her safe?

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

- Questions for study and discussion
- Passages for close analysis
- Warm-up activities
- Lesson and project ideas
- Writing activities

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

II. Questions for study and discussion:

General:

1. What does Elvina begin the book by telling us about? How does her belief in her Mazal continue to show up throughout the book?

2. What do we learn about Elvina in this first chapter? What makes her different from other girls her age? What are some of her talents?

3. Why does Elvina's mother say that Elvina can't go with them to help her friend Tova? What does that foreshadow?

Characters:

1. Create a character profile of Elvina. What are some of her different qualities? Make a chart listing the adjectives you would use to describe her on one side, and on the other side, make a list for each adjective of what happens in the novel that leads you to describe her with that adjective.

2. Make a "personality map" for the rest of Elvina's family. Chart out some of the shared characteristics as if they were different continents, connecting the ones that you think are linked to each other. In each "characteristic continent," write the names of the characters in Elvina's family who share that characteristic.

3. What role does Elvina's grandfather, Rashi, play in her character development? How do his teachings influence her?

Plot:

1. What are some of the challenges Elvina faces? How does she face each of them?

2. How do we see Elvina's love of learning throughout the novel? How do others feel about her love for learning—her friend Muriel, her grandfather, her father, Obadiah, her "students" Rachel and Naomi?

3. Find three times when Elvina goes to her grandfather for advice. What advice does he give her?

4. Make a timeline for the interactions between the Jews and the Crusaders throughout the novel.

III. Passages:

1. Page 59
"She wasn't telling me anything new. I've been preparing the Sabbath with her ever since I could walk. But yesterday, as we both stood hand in hand, shivering, our freezing breath mingling in the cold air, I drank in my mother's words as if my life depended on it."

Why was Elvina frightened? Why were the Shabbat traditions so important to do exactly right? What did the Shabbat represent to Elvina's family? Why was this a particularly important time for her family to celebrate their traditions? What traditions are especially important to your family?

2. Page 74
"I remembered hearing my grandfather say that if a non-Jew's house catches fire on the Sabbath, a Jew is permitted to help put out the fire, because not doing so could have terrible consequences. Also, I must admit, I felt sorry for this wounded boy who was scarcely older than me. He was crying in pain, and I feared his wound might be dangerous. It is permitted to save a life, even on the Sabbath."

How do Elvina's thoughts always take Jewish teachings into account? What do you think of to help you make a decision? What do the particular teachings she mentions tell us about Jewish tradition and values?

3. Page 123
"Ever since I was a child, the only thing I have ever wanted to do was study. I can stay hidden in this hole for weeks. It's big enough. Look, I can even stretch out and lie down. If I stay here until Peter the Hermit gives the signal to leave, they'll give up looking for me. There's a monastery I can go to where the monks will take me in and let me study."

Why does Gauthier have to hide to do what he wants? How does Elvina help him to stay hidden and escape being forced to join the Crusaders? Has there ever been a time when you had difficulty doing something you wanted to do? What did you do to overcome that difficulty? Did anyone help you?

4. Page 154
"We are reading; we are no longer ignorant; we are students, your students…"

What has Elvina done for Rachel and Naomi? Why do they want so much to learn? Why is knowledge so important? Why is it important that they say, "We are ***your*** *students" to Elvina? Is there any particular subject that it has especially helped you to know, or one that you were particularly excited to learn about?*

4. Page 189
"Solomon continues, 'Your daughter has a generous heart. Because of that, she takes risks. It was the Lord's will that, for the second time, her impetuousness be rewarded.'"

What were the two occasions on which Elvina took a risk because of her generous heart? What were the results of those two actions? What are the reasons why her actions made her father angry? Why did her grandfather praise her actions?

6. Page 190
"It is a moment of extraordinary peace. It seems to her that her father is swallowing hard; then, in an emotional and solemn voice, which Elvina has never heard him use before,

Judah says, 'Blessed be the Lord.' Then he looks at Miriam, and in his usual ironic tone he continues, 'What a strange daughter the Almighty has sent us!'"

At earlier times in the book, when Judah remarked on how Elvina was different from other girls her age, how did he seem to feel about that? How does he seem to feel about it now? What types of activities were usual for girls like Elvina? What kinds of activities did Elvina prefer? How did Elvina show that she could be a good "daughter of Israel" even with her unusual ways?

IV. Warm-Up Activities

1. Learn about Rashi:

→Do online and library research to create a biographical sketch of Rashi, the rabbi and scholar on whom Solomon, Elvina's grandfather, is based. Make a list of Rashi's accomplishments.

→When Rashi's commentary is printed in the Talmud or Tanakh it appears in a different typeface than the original text. That is how printers made it clear which art of the page was what. See http://www.schechter.org/sager/links/fifth/Rashi/RashiScript.html for a sample of what has become known as Rashi script. Make a welcome sign for your class in Rashi script. Practice writing your name in Rashi script.

2. Famous Women:

Elvina is a wonderful example of a female role model. Think about what makes her such an admirable character. Using online and library research, find out about three other women in Jewish history who were unconventional women for their time period, and from whom we can still learn today. Make posters or reports about these women.

3. Brainstorm:

There are some important key phrases in this book—mazal, learning, daughter of Israel (or choose your own). Do some free-association brainstorming to see what people think of when they hear those words.

4. Take the "Are You a Creature of Courage?" Quiz on www.babaganewz.com

Go to **http://www.babaganewz.com/quizcentral/Flashindex.cfm** and take the Courage quiz. Elvina showed great courage at several different points in the novel. What kind of courage do you show in your life? What about Elvina— was she like the Lone Wolf, Roaring Lion or Galloping Gazelle?

V. Class Projects and Lessons

1. **You Be the Commentator**

- Start by showing the students a traditionally laid-out page of Talmud, with the central text from the *Mishnah* and the response from the *Gemara* in the center of the page, surrounded by commentaries, including Rashi's. See http://www.ucalgary.ca/~elsegal/TalmudPage.html for a wonderful annotated example of a page of Talmud.

  Give the students a chance to familiarize themselves with the page and its contents. Who are some of the different commentators? What do the commentators base their commentary on? What are some of the functions of commentary?

  Discuss the idea of commentary as a conversation across generations— one person responding to the thoughts and opinions of another, all in writing, all different depending on who the person is and when they live.

  Stage a commentary conversation, using a simple quote as the base text. You might want to refer to the Torah Page in any issue of BABAGANEWZ for a short Jewish values-based text to which students can respond. Different students should represent different time periods or schools of thought or perspectives (i.e., legal, governmental, spiritual, artistic) and respond to both the original text and to the commentaries of those who go before them.

- Working in groups, have the students create their own Talmud-style commentary page. *Pirkei Avot* would work well; use some of the teachings which carry a lot of potential layers of meaning but are relatively easy to understand and examine. Students should identify different ways for them to examine the base text. What types of questions can they ask about it? What can they look for in it? Once they've developed some of these different angles, they can lay the page out like a page of Talmud, with their own commentaries surrounding the core text.

- Break students into groups to research and explore significant Biblical commentators other than Rashi. Each group should create a visual (poster, flyer, 3-D representation) that explains the person's biography and gives viewers an idea about his or her approach to Torah commentary. Possible scholars include: Nachmanides, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Don Isaac Abarbanel, Sforno, Nehama Leibowitz, etc.

2. Choose Your Own Adventure!

In the novel, Elvina makes many of her decisions by thinking about Jewish teachings and about her grandfather's advice. In this activity, students will create their own path of decisions according to Jewish teachings.

- Start by passing out different Jewish quotes to different students; they can be quotes from the Torah, the Talmud or modern Jewish people and sources.
- Have the students share their quotes in small groups. The students should help each other brainstorm: What types of decisions could that quote help a hypothetical person to make? To what questions could this quote be an answer?
- Each student should choose the scenario that most interests them with their quote. The student should begin a story with a scene that draws out that scenario, leading up to the moment of decision, using the quote to help make the decision one way. The student should then look for a different quote, one that would help make the decision a different way. That's the first "Choose your own adventure" moment in the student's story – depending on which quote their reader chooses to follow, they will follow a different path from that point on, coming to more decisions, each time with two quotes to help them make the decision one way or the other. The paths can intersect at different points, as characters on different paths may come to similar decisions. The book should be laid out like a "Choose your own adventure" book – after each decision, with instructions of where to go next (i.e. "If you followed Hillel's advice, turn to page 12. If you followed Shammai's advice, turn to page 17.")
- The students can share their books with their classmates. Discuss: Who are the figures in our lives who we look to for advice? How can sources and figures from the past (or present figures who we may not know personally) help to guide us and give us advice?

3. B'nei Mitzvah Themes, values-style

- Start by discussing: What B'nei Mitzvah themes have the students seen before? How do people usually choose their themes? What are the different parts of the B'nei Mitzvah which are affected by the theme?
- Split the students into groups and assign them each a Jewish value. The students should then design a B'nei Mitzvah with that value as its theme.
    - The students can create an invitation based on the theme.
    - The students can design the service based on the theme – what songs or prayers or readings (or anything different) would they add or change?
    - The students can then design the party based on the theme – what decorations would they have? What music? What activities? Anything they can think of to link the celebration with the theme is great.

To finish, the students can write about what becoming a "son or daughter of the commandments" means to them. What values make Jewish life and law meaningful for them? What parts of Judaism do they feel a sense of ownership over as they approach (or have approached) their own Bar or Bat Mitzvah?

VI. Writing Activities

1. Have students choose one of the different characters who learn a lesson over the course of the book – Elvina, Judah, Muriel, Naomi and Rachel, Gauthier, Yom-Tov and Samuel,

Obadiah, Peter the Hermit. Write a journal entry as if they were that character, reflecting on the lesson they learned. What did they used to think that now they understand differently? How did they learn that lesson? How will it change their thoughts or behavior in the future?

2. Personal journal exercise: Ask students to consider what they might feel strongly enough about to go against popular opinion if they had to – like Elvina did with her learning, or when she helped to hide Gauthier. What obstacles do they come up against in their situation? Why is this choice important enough to them to overcome those obstacles? How can they help people to see what they see?

3. Goal-setting: Elvina not only stuck to her own passion for learning despite obstacles, but she helped to pass that passion on by teaching Naomi and Rachel how to read. Ask the students to think of something they know well enough to teach. Have the students write about what that skill is, why they enjoy it and how they have come to be good at it, and who might be helped by learning that skill. Are there people within your own community who could use help with this skill? Are there people in other communities who would benefit from you coming to teach or tutor or lead an activity? Try to set a personal goal for how you might go and teach one of your skills to others.