Thank You, Jackie Robinson
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 *Thank You, Jackie Robinson* by Barbara Cohen. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the concept if *hakarat hatov* (appreciation) addressed in the *Chesvan* issue of BABAGANEWZ.

Thank You, Jackie Robinson is a novel about an unlikely friendship that crossed generations, race, and religion. The year is 1947; the place is Winter Hill, New Jersey. Sam is a shy 12 year-old with an unconditional love for and unending fascination with the Brooklyn Dodgers. When Sam meets Davy, the 60 year-old cook at this mother's inn, he discovers a fellow Dodger fan and a new friend. While the two are initially united by their mutual love for the Dodgers, Sam soon finds in Davy a teacher, a father figure, and a confidant. With Davy, Sam attends his first Dodger game and is a witness to Jackie Robinson's first season on the team. When Davy is sick in the hospital, Sam must overcome his timidity and fear to get Davy what will no doubt be the best gift ever: a Dodger baseball signed by Jackie Robinson and the other members of the team. Throughout the course of the novel, Sam learns about the lasting power of friendship, despite differences and eventual loss.

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

- Questions for study and discussion
- Passages for close analysis
- Lesson ideas
- Writings activities
- Project ideas

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

Historical context:

1. Where and when does the novel take place? What are the key historical events that characterizes this period in American history?

2. Who is the new player on the Dodgers? Why is his inclusion on the team a milestone in baseball history?

Characters:

1. Who are the people that comprise Sam's family? How is Sam's fascination with the Brooklyn Dodgers a refuge for him? What is Sam's unique talent when it comes to baseball?

2. How does Sam meet Davy? From the start, how is Davy different from the other cooks who worked for this mother?

Plot:

1. At his first Dodger game, Sam sees a player slide into first base and try to "spike" Jackie. How does Davy explain this occurrence? How would you characterize the tone of his explanation?

2. When Sam is unable to visit Davy in the hospital, he devises a plan to get him the perfect gift. What is his plan and what turn of events allows him to achieve his goal?

3. After his visit to the hospital, Sam remarks that "there was no magic in the ball." What did he think would happen and why is he so upset by this realization?

III. Passages:

1. Page 58
"Davy said, 'Wait till next year.'
'I thought you said next year is a very chancy thing,' I reminded him.
'I said,' Davy reminded me, 'never wait till next year if you can help it. But if you can't help it, well, then, you've got to. Listen, Sammy…human beings live in hope. That's what the Dodgers taught me, all those lean years before the war. Wait till next year.'"

According to Davy, what did the Dodgers teach him? Why do you think it was the Dodgers, specifically, that conveyed this lesson to him?

2. Page 65

" …But Davy and I had a swell time as always, and I'm glad the Dodgers won, because that was the last time I got to see a game with Davy. I'd have really savored every second of it if I'd known, but I guess it's just as well I didn't know. Because if I'd known I'd have *appreciated* that game, but I couldn't have *enjoyed* it, if you know what I mean."

What **does** he mean? What is the distinction Sam makes between appreciation and enjoyment?

3. Pages 84–85

" So I told him. I told him everything, or as near to everything as I could tell in five minutes…I told him how they wouldn't let me into the hospital to see Davy, and how we had always talked about catching a ball that was hit onto the stands and getting it autographed.

Jackie listened silently, nodding every once in a while. When I was done at last, he said, 'Well, now, kid, I'll tell you what. You keep this ball you brought with you. Keep it to play with. And borrow a pen from someone. Come back to the dugout the minute, the very second, the game is over, and I'll get you a real ball, one played with, and I'll get all the guys to autograph it for you.'"

Why do you think the book is called "Thank You, Jackie Robinson?" Why does Jackie go out of his way to help Sammy? How is this an example of *hakarat hatov*?

4. Page 114

"That body didn't look like Davy sleeping. It didn't look like Davy at all. That is, it looked like Davy, but it wasn't Davy. It was a wax dummy of Davy, and it bore about the same relationship to him that one of those monster dolls in a store window bears to a living, breathing human being…There's a kind of resemblance, but you'd never mistake the one for the other."

Why is Henrietta initially insulted by Sam's statement? What is Sam trying to relay to her?

5. Pages 122–123

" In spite of telling myself that I didn't want to listen to the game because I had no one to share it with, I really did want to know what was happening, just for my own sake. And yet I felt that to turn that radio on would have been some kind of betrayal of love, and the anger, and the grief I had been feeling all week— all the emotions which I thought I'd have been better off if I'd never known, and yet which I stubbornly clung to as if I'd cease to exist once they ceased to exist…

Davy ought to know about it too, wherever he was— just in case he was somewhere. And since we all seemed to agree that he wasn't in the mahogany box in the ground, maybe, just maybe, he *was* somewhere— somewhere else."

Why is Sam uncomfortable with the idea of listening to the game? What does he mean that he clung to the emotions of love, grief and anger "as if [he would] cease to exist once they ceased to exist?" How does he resolve this internal conflict?

IV. **Lesson Ideas**

1. Jackie Robinson stands out in the novel and in history as a figure that broke the color barrier. Use the novel as a jumping off point to explore other figures that challenged societal barriers constructed along race, gender, and religious lines.
   Begin the lesson with a closer look at Jackie Robinson's accomplishment. Discuss the following questions:
   - How did segregation manifest itself in sports prior to the 1940s? (Americans began playing baseball in informal leagues in the early 1800s. African Americans played baseball throughout the 1800s but as a reflection of American society in general, amateur and professional teams were largely separated by race).
   - What do you think were some of the pressures Jackie faced as the first African American player to "cross the color line?" (e.g., confronting intense public scrutiny, resistance by other players in the league, etc.).
   - What kind of qualities does a person need in order to effectively overcome these obstacles?

   As a class, brainstorm a list of other figures that have broken down lines of color, class, gender, or religion. Give each student one of these people to research at home. Afterwards, have each student do a brief presentation on their chosen personality, outlining the status quo and how their figure challenged that standard.
   Close the lesson by asking students if they think "lines" exist today. If so, what are they and what are mechanisms that can be used to break through these lines?

2. On page 111, Sam writes, "When a Jew dies, they just stick the body in the ground. That's how they did with my father. Before twenty-four hours had passed, they had his body in the ground.

   Davy was a Christian and Christians do it differently. At least, Henrietta was a Christian. She belonged to the AME Zion Church. AME, I found out that day, stands for African Methodist Episcopal, and they believe in viewings. Viewings, or wakes, or whatever you want to call them."

   Sam astutely touches upon the variant mourning rituals of different religions. In Christianity there are viewings prior to the burial whereas in Jewish tradition the body is buried as soon after the death as possible, as a mark of respect. After the funeral, a seven-day period of *Shiva* is observed at the home of the mourners. The allowed mourning period for a Muslim is three days, except in the case of a widow mourning her husband, in which case she may mourn four months and 10 days. According to Buddhist practice, the casket is open and guests are expected to view the body and bow slightly toward it. Friends may visit the family of the deceased after the funeral, but not before.

As a class create a list of other life-cycle events such as birth, a rite of passage, or marriage. Ask students to vote for one of these events to study in greater detail. Divide students into small groups and assign them each a different religious tradition. Instruct them to research and prepare a presentation on the rituals and customs associated with the life-cycle event for their given tradition. Presentations should include visual props and should be as interactive as possible. As a class, compare these rituals to those found in Judaism. Ask students to consider why Judaism marks these life-cycle events in such a way. What Jewish values underlie the rationale for these Jewish rituals?

V. Writing Activities

1. Have students write an imagined interview with Jackie Robinson or an imagined first-person account of his first appearance with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

2. *Thank You, Jackie Robinson* is written in the first-person and is told by a grown-up Sam as he remembers and reflects upon his friendship with Davy. Ask you students to write a short story or essay retelling the events of a significant event in their lives. Provide them with the following tips for writing a memoir to assist in this process:
   - The story should start at the beginning. Aim to tell the story in its entirety but make facts short and elaborate whenever you have an interesting detail to relate.
   - Include any goals or dreams you are working towards or have already accomplished.
   - Try to get the order of events right to provide your reader with a frame of reference.

3. Ask students to write a thank you letter to someone who has been good to them or others in the spirit of *hakarat hatov*. They can write to a person they know personally or to a societal figure they admire. Encourage students to deliver or send their letters in an effort to recognize AND acknowledge the good work of others.

VI. Projects Ideas

1. As an extension of section IV, number 1, ask students to create a poster and a timeline for their historical figures that outlines their accomplishments and any other pertinent information. These posters should be hung in the classroom to create a "Heroes Museum." Invite other classes and parents to come and "tour" the Museum.

2. *Thank You, Jackie Robinson* tells the story of an unlikely friendship between a 12 year-old Jewish boy and a 60 year-old African American man. Begin the activity by asking students:
   - Have you ever had or do you have a friend that, on the surface, you seemed like an odd match?
   - Why are these types of relationships important?
   - In the case of the novel, what do you think Sam learned from Davy? In what ways were they similar and in what ways were they different?

As a class, make it a goal to foster these unlikely relationships. This can be achieved by becoming pen pals with students in another city or county, by pairing with another class of students in another part of the city, or organizing an intergenerational program with a senior center, etc. Brainstorm a list of ideas with your students and have the students vote on one project they would like to do this year to build relationships with individuals or groups who are seemingly different from them. Once a project is decided upon, students should take the necessary steps to implement their idea (i.e. create a list of tasks, divide responsibilities, and set project/time goals).