MOVIE STUDY GUIDE: *DESPICABLE ME*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study guide is to provide discussion material about the 2010 Universal Pictures film *Despicable Me.* Through viewing and studying the film, students will be able to identify and discuss the Jewish values evident in *Despicable Me*. Ultimately, this will help your students become more attuned to finding the Judaism-based values apparent in the world around them.

In *Despicable Me*, super-villain Gru, with the help of a team of little yellow minions, takes on a fabulous heist to steal the moon in an attempt to out-do another super-villain. Gru can only get funding for the job if he can acquire a shrink ray, which will shrink the moon and enable him to steal it. He succeeds in stealing the ray from an Asian factory, but it is then stolen from him by Vector, a nerdy super-villain who becomes Gru's arch-nemesis. Gru ends up adopting three girls who were able to easily enter Vector's residence by selling him cookies and uses them to steal back the shrink ray. Gru is not the ideal father for these girls, but does slowly warm up to them over the course of the film. Gru ends up raising enough money to build a rocket to take him to the moon. Once there, he shrinks it and rushes back to earth for the girls' ballet recital. However, he is late and misses the show. Instead, he finds a ransom note from Vector, demanding the moon in return for the girls. Gru obliges without hesitation, but Vector refuses to hand over the girls and kidnaps them on his air ship. This leads to a mid-air rescue operation, with Gru and his minions successfully saving the girls. After clarifying his own priorities and redefining what it means to be a hero, Gru learns to become a father to the girls.

II. QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. The beginning of the film introduces us to Gru with examples of his selfishness and cruelty. Provide two examples from the film and discuss your reaction to his behavior. What were his motives for acting in such a manner? How did you feel watching others "get hurt"?

2. Why did Gru feel such a strong desire to out-do the villain who stole the pyramid? What negative character trait, which Judaism speaks extensively about, was at work here?

3. Are there times that we are passionate about something for the wrong reasons? Provide an example from the movie and in real life.

4. Discuss how Gru's attitude toward the girls changes over the course of the film. What scene in the film do you think was the turning point and why?

5. Discuss how your opinion of Gru changed over the course of the film. What contributed to your attitude shift?

6. Gru was motivated to build the rocket to the moon because his mother never supported his inventions as a child. How do we see the human side of Gru in these childhood scenes? How does understanding his background allow you to have more sympathy for him?

7. Name three Jewish values that Gru learns by the end of the film. What do you think brought about these realizations for him?

III. LESSON IDEAS

1. JEWISH VALUES IN ACTION

Before showing the film, distribute a list of Jewish values. Fifty such values are listed at the footer of Babaganewz.com. Ask students to jot down the scenes where they see the Jewish values in action. After the film is done, have a class discussion with students sharing their examples. List some student answers on the board. Some possibilities:

Ometz Lev (Courage) – the girls' courage in living with Gru when they were first adopted, jumping off Vector's air ship

Gevurah (Heroism) – Gru exchanging the moon for the girls, saving the girls from the air ship

*Tikvah (*Hope) – the girls' attitude in leaving the orphanage and throughout their stay with Gru

Hesed (Kindness) –Gru slowly warms up to the girls after showing them kindness

Hithadshut (New Beginnings) – Gru's new identity as a father and a giving person

Teshuvah (Returning) – Gru's second chance at being loyal to the girls

Behirah Hofshit (Making Choices) – Gru's lifestyle as villain or as a hero was a choice

2. JEWISH SOURCES ON FRIENDSHIP

The following texts can be studied as a class or in small groups. Students in these small groups can be responsible for learning and presenting their material to the rest of the class. Source sheets with the corresponding Hebrew texts are available to print at Babaganewz.com.

A. *Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their labor. For should they fall, one can raise the other; but woe to the one who falls and has no companion to raise that person up!* (Ecclesiastes 4:9–10)

- Why are two better than one? Explain with an example.
- How can a friend raise the other if he or she should fall?
- What can "falling" mean besides physical falling?
- What does this text teach us about the power of a true friend?
- How does this text relate to Gru in *Despicable Me*? How does this text relate to the girls?

B. *Make for yourself a teacher and acquire for yourself a friend.* (Pirkei Avot 1:6)

- What do you think is the difference between the verbs "make" in regards to having a teacher and "acquire" in regards to having a friend?
- Compare and contrast the relationship with a teacher vs. the relationship with a friend.
- Is it easy to "acquire a friend"? What steps does a person need to achieve this?
- Explain how this text relates to *Despicable Me*.

C. *A person loves the fruits of his or her efforts, as one feels that he or she has imparted one's essence to it. Whether it is a child he or she has brought up, an animal he or she has raised, a plant he or she has nurtured, or even a house he or she has built, the person feels bound with love to the results of one's own labor. In it, one sees him or herself.* (Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, Mikhtav Me'Eliyau)

- Why does a person love the child he or she has brought up or the house he or she has built, according to Rabbi Dessler?
- What is an example of something in which you have invested? How do you see yourself in the results of your labor?
- Explain how this text relates to *Despicable Me*.

3. JEWISH SOURCES ON HEROISM

The following texts can be studied as a class or in small groups. Students in these small groups can be responsible for learning and presenting their material to the rest of the class. Source sheets with the corresponding Hebrew texts are available to print at Babaganewz.com.

A. *When can someone be called a mighty person? When that someone seizes the hand of an individual who is about to fall into a pit or when that someone sees another who has already fallen into a pit and lifts that person out.* (Midrash Tehillim 52:6)

- What are the two definitions of a hero according to the *Midrash*? Why do you think these two examples are given?
- How might this *Midrash* be interpreted metaphorically? In other words, what could "about to fall into a pit" and "already fallen into a pit" represent?
- Have you ever helped someone who in a difficult situation? How might you have been a hero to that person?
- How does this text apply to *Despicable Me*?

B. *In a place where there are no people, strive to be a person.* (Pirkei Avot 2:6)

- In what situation would there be a place where there are no people?
- What do you think the advice "strive to be a person" means?
- Have you ever been that person to make a difference or help out? Explain.
- How does this text relate to Gru in *Despicable Me*?

C. *The entire world is a very narrow bridge, but the main thing is not to fear at all.* (Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav)

- How is the world a very narrow bridge?
- How could one not be afraid if the world is a very narrow bridge? Could Rabbi Nahman's advice be any good?
- Does being afraid help at all when trying to cross that narrow bridge? What should a person think instead?
- How does this quote relate to Gru as well as the girls in *Despicable Me*?

4. JEWISH SOURCES ON MAKING CHOICES

The following texts can be studied as a class or in small groups. Students in these small groups can be responsible for learning and presenting their material to the rest of the class. Source sheets with the corresponding Hebrew texts are available to print at Babaganewz.com.

A. *Each person is fit to be righteous like Moshe our teacher, or wicked like Jeroboam…There is no one who forces, sentences, or leads a person to either of these two paths. Rather, the person makes his or her own decision which path to choose.* (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 5:2)

- What is this source telling us about righteous people and wicked people?
- Do you agree with this idea? Why or why not?
- What does this text teach us about the power of decision-making?

- How does this source shed light on the villains and heroes in *Despicable Me*?

B. *Life and death I have placed before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life.* (Devarim 30:19)

- How is blessing and curse compared to life and death?
- Doesn't it seem simple that we would all choose life? What does it mean to choose life?
- How might we not choose life in our day-to-day decisions?
- Apply this text to *Despicable Me* by contrasting Gru's life in the beginning of the film to his life at the end of the film.

C. *What constitutes teshuvah? That a sinner should abandon his or her sins and remove them from his or her thoughts, resolving in that person's heart never to commit them again…Similarly, that person must regret the past….[That person must reach the level where] he or she knows….that he or she will not return to this sin again….That person must verbally confess and state these matters which he or she resolved to his or her heart.* (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 2:2)

- What three things must a person do to achieve *teshuvah*?
- Why do you think regretting the past is an important part of the *teshuvah* process?
- What parts of *teshuvah* are focused on future choices?
- In *Despicable Me,* what past mistake did Gru regret and choose to fix the second time around?

IV. WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. Put your feet in the shoes of Margo, Edith, or Agnes and write a diary entry about the day that Gru came to the orphanage to adopt you. What were your hopes when you heard you were to be adopted? What did you envision your new home to be like? What were your impressions of Gru and how did your hopes change once you actually met him?

2. Create a front page of a newspaper chronicling the villainous schemes of the two competing super-villains, Vector and Gru. Include text and graphics.

3. At the end of the movie, Gru reads the girls a bedtime book that he created which is really about him and the girls. Create a short bedtime book that Margo, Edith, and Agnes make for Gru about their relationship with their new father.

4. Write a final scene to the movie. What happens with Gru and the girls? Do his parenting techniques improve at all, or does he still serve them lollipops for dinner? How does Gru feel about giving up his title as super-villain? What are his feats as a newly-minted super-hero?

V. PROJECTS

1. Explore the question of how a person can make the choice to change. Conduct an interview with a person who has made a life-altering change. How did they have the courage to do this? What was their motivation? How do they feel about their life now?

2. Speak to friends and family and find a real-life hero that you can contact. Listen to his or her story and write a letter after your conversation expressing your impressions and feelings about his or her heroic act.

3. Friendship is strengthened through acts of giving. Organize a gift-sharing event at school where an older student is paired with a younger student and asked to bring in a small gift under $5 to be swapped. You'll soon see a new friendly face walking down the hall whom you might not have known before.