“Mother Knows Best”

LEsson PLAN BY JUDITH ROSENBAUM

SUPPLEMENT ONE, PAGES 6–7

The Jewish Women’s Archive (JWA) uncovers, chronicles, and transmits the rich legacy of Jewish women and their contributions to our families and communities, to our people and our world. Visit the JWA website (www.jwa.org) for more lesson plans and teaching tools about Jewish women in America.

“Mothers Knows Best” is a dramatization based on the collection of letters from 1733–1748 between colonial American Abigail Franks and her son Naphtali, who went off to London to make his fortune. In this lesson, students explore the challenges faced by Jews in the colonial period and the Jewish values of family and community through dramatic reading, text study, and creative writing activities.

OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand the challenges and opportunities that Jews faced in early America.
- Students will relate these early American Jewish experiences and the importance of community and family to their own lives.

VOCABULARY

mother
son
letter
States of America

QUOTES & QUESTIONS

“Dear Heartsey, we seem to be going in opposite directions.”

In what ways do you think Abigail and Naphtali are heading in opposite directions?

What does Abigail hope for her son? What does Naphtali hope for himself?

“As you are now launched out amongst strangers, you must be exceedingly circumspect in your conduct. Be affable to all men, but not credulous; nor too soon be led away by fair speeches of friendship.”

What is Abigail saying here? [Have your students look up unfamiliar words in the dictionary.] What are her concerns about her son’s behavior? Why does she focus on these specific traits?

Do you agree with her advice?

“Mother’s behavior can be confusing. She embraces the openness of America, where she lives as a Jew and a British-American New Yorker. But she’s also afraid of the consequences of openness. As with many Jews today, freedom has brought Abigail joy and pain.”

How has freedom brought her joy? How has it brought her pain? What about America’s openness frightens her? What about it does she appreciate?

What characteristics of American society cause you joy or pain?

ACTIVITY: ACT IT OUT

1. Introduce your students to the Franks family. Explain that the Franks family was a prominent merchant family living in New York in the 1700s and that the American Jewish Historical Society has preserved many of their letters. (For more information, check out www.ajhs.org.)

2. Take it to the stage! Set up the desks and props as described on page 6 of the BARAGANewz SUPPLEMENT. If possible, bring in a scarf, suit jacket, or hats for costumes. Ask for volunteers to act out the play.

What is going on here?

What is Naphtali’s attitude toward his mother? What is Abigail’s attitude toward her son?

3. Discuss the Quotes & Questions above.

4. Have students imagine that they are in Naphtali’s place:

You have finished your education and are leaving your family for a very long time.

What advice do you think your parents would give you? What would they tell you about how to live as a Jew? What would they tell you about how to behave in your new community? What might they say about dating and marriage?

What do you think you would miss about your family the most?

Write a short letter to your parents, responding to their advice.

Ask for volunteers to read their letters aloud.

How are these responses similar to Naphtali’s?

How did your parents’ advice differ from Abigail’s?

5. Have students imagine that they are parents and have them write a letter to their son or daughter who has moved far away.

How does the advice that you gave differ from your parents’?

6. Study the Jewish Texts below.

7. Optional Discussion: Abigail Franks worried about finding Jewish spouses for her children, and she was greatly distressed when her daughter chose to marry a Christian. If you feel it is appropriate for your class, you may want to take this opportunity to discuss the role of assimilation and intermarriage in the American Jewish community.

JEWISH TEXTS

SHEMOT 20:12

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days will be lengthened in the land that God, your God, gives you.

What does it mean to honor one’s mother and father? How does Naphtali honor his mother? How do you honor your parents?

DEVARIM 5:5–7

You shall love God, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your resources. And these matters that I command you today shall be upon your heart. You shall teach them to your children and you shall speak of them while you sit in your house, while you walk on the way, when you lie down, and when you arise.

What does it mean to place these words “upon your heart”? How can parents teach these ideas to their children? How have your parents taught you?

PIRKEI AVOT 2:13

[Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai said to his students:] “Which is the best trait for a person to cling to?” Rabbi Eliezer says: A good eye. Rabbi Yehoshua says: A good friend. Rabbi Yossi says: A good neighbor. Rabbi Shimon says: One who considers consequences. Rabbi Elazar says: A good heart. Rabbi Yoḥanan says to them, “I prefer the words of Rabbi Elazar over the others, for his words contain all of yours.”

What is each student of Rabbi Yoḥanan saying in his answer? Who do you agree with most? How does Rabbi Elazar’s answer include all the others? How would Abigail Franks answer this question?