

BABAGANEWZ

Alan and Naomi by Myron Levoy

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 *Alan and Naomi* by Myron Levoy. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the value *hesed*, the theme of the Heshvan 5769 issue of BABAGANEWZ.

The novel features Alan, a fourteen year old boy growing up in New York during the second World War. When Naomi Kirshenbaum, a refugee from France, moves into his apartment building with her mother, his parents encourage him to befriend her. Alan is initially reluctant; Naomi is deeply scarred by her war experiences and the neighborhood kids think she is “crazy.” However, Alan visits her regularly and succeeds, almost single-handedly, in stabilizing her. She begins to talk again, ventures outside, and ultimately joins Alan in school. Her growth is not lasting, however, and the story ends tragically, but Alan is forever changed and matured by his experience. The hesed that Alan performs for Naomi and the friendship that develops changes him; he grows by through giving to someone else.

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. When does this story take place? What major world event is happening in Europe? To what degree do world events affect Alan’s life?
2. Mama equates a “mixed neighborhood” with “not such a good neighborhood” (18). Do any characters feel comfortable with this diversity? How does Alan feel? Does Alan completely identify with any one group?

3. Alan is regarded differently by the adults in his life and by his peers. How does each group perceive him? How does he perceive himself? How does he want to be perceived?
4. Why is Alan so reluctant to visit his new neighbor? What is he afraid will happen?
5. Why does Naomi rip paper compulsively? When does she resort to this impulse? What other signs indicate her emotional state?
6. Why does Alan choose the Charlie McCarthy dummy instead of the other toys in his closet? Why does Naomi respond to the puppet? How does the mirror in Alan's apartment help Naomi move beyond her dependency on the puppet?
7. Carefully track Alan's visits to Naomi. When does he feel hopeless and frustrated? What motivates him to continue?
8. Why does Alan ask Naomi to be his secret friend? Would you be hurt if one of your friends asked you to keep your friendship a secret? Why do you think that Naomi is not offended by his request?
9. What does Alan enjoy about his visits with Naomi? What does he enjoy about Shaun? Do you think that he is correct in thinking that he can't "run like a lunatic" with Naomi and "visit quietly" with Shaun (80)?
10. Why does Alan assume that Shaun wouldn't understand his visits to Naomi? Find hints in the earlier part of the novel that Shaun would have been supportive of Alan's friendship with Naomi.
11. What changes do you detect in Alan as his friendship with Naomi grows?
12. Naomi spends only a few days at school before tragedy strikes again. What happens and why is Naomi so frightened by it? Why does she hide in the basement?
13. Why does Alan express his mourning by ripping his plane to shreds?
14. Alan does not believe that Naomi will ever recover from this latest trauma, and the book closes with an image of him crying into the ground. Do you think that Alan will recover from the trauma of losing his friend? Overall, do you think that his efforts were worthwhile, or does the final loss outweigh everything that he has gained?

III. PASSAGES FOR CLOSE ANALYSIS

1. Page 20:

“In our life, Alan, sometimes when we’re young, sometimes when we’re old, in our life, once or twice, we’re called upon to do something we can’t do, that we don’t want to do, that we won’t do. But we do it…”

Why do we do it? It’s a mystery. Maybe to prove that what we are is something a little more than what we think we are.”

What does Alan think of himself? Is he proud of who he is? What kind of person does Alan want to be?

2. Page 62:

“She was talking! Sensible talk! Like a human being! Naomi-Yvette.”

“Voila. My slippers for…for ballet,” said Yvette, still hesitant. Naomi took the doll’s shoes and put them on Yvette’s feet. “You dance…with me, Sharlee? I dance…if you dance…”

“Sure, OK,” said Charlie. “Here we go, Naomi.”

Naomi instantly leaped to the farthest part of her bed, away from Alan. Fear spread from her mouth to her eyes. Yvette asked, in a tight, shrill voice, “Naomi! Who is that?”

Alan blinked and hesitated. Stupid jerk, he thought. It’s supposed to be Charlie to Yvette. Jerk! Say the right thing now.

“I meant…let’s dance, Yvette, kid…”

…The doll tore and tore, while Naomi’s face remained blank. Alan felt those snakes in his stomach twisting again. It was like another strikeout, if she didn’t answer. Like ten strikeouts in a row. Couldn’t he do anything right?”

Why does Naomi immediately revert to silence and begin ripping paper again? Do you agree with Alan’s assumption that he is responsible for her regression? Is it true that he can’t do anything right?

3. Page 73:

“Alan sighed with relief. Naomi wasn’t frightened anymore. And as he made Charlie wave goodbye, Naomi made the doll wave back. He’d done something right, at last. He had hit a home run, for a change.”

Why does Alan think of his visits with Naomi in terms of baseball?

4. Page 120:

“ ‘You can feel quite proud of yourself. Of course, I know you by now, and perhaps you don’t feel proud at all. You have so much insight for your age, perhaps you just feel lucky to have what it takes to help, you see.’

Lucky? Alan's mind juggled with the word. His father had said that too. Was he lucky? And did he have what it takes? If he did, why was he still hiding Naomi from Shaun and all the others? And why was he so glad that Shaun had left and couldn't hear all this?

...Alan struggled with the double load of books as he walked home, but his mind seemed to move along the treetops. What words! "You're great." "I think you're great." "So much insight for your age." And best of all, "You are strong."

But am I, he wondered. Well if I'm not, I will be. *Sort of!*"

Do you think that Alan is an insightful person? How does his response to Mrs. Landley reflect his insight and self-awareness? Why do you think that Alan values Mrs. Landley's opinion more than his mother's insistence that he is "lovely" and Mrs. Liebman's repeated praise?

5. Page 185:

"Yeah, well you know, stay away from crazy people. Let me give you some advice. Stay away from people like that. Before you know it, they'll drive you crazy, too."

How does Alan react to the policeman's statement? Are there any points in the story when Alan feels the same way, frightened that his friendship to Naomi would make him "crazy"?

6. Page 187:

"In front of the coal pile, like a cornered animal, Naomi sat crouched. She was covered with soot...Alan could see only her eyes clearly in the half darkness. Her face, caked with coal dust and grease, seemed like a mask, one of those hideous witch-doctor masks Alan had seen in the Museum of Natural History. Her eyes, alone, were there."

How does this passage compare to the first description of Naomi in Chapter 1? Why are the two passages so similar? What does this tell us about Naomi's state of mind?

IV. LESSON IDEAS

1. Become Alan for a day. Divide the students in groups and have each group research one of his interests:
 - What is a Supermarine Spitfire? How does it compare to a P-40?
 - What are the rules of stickball?
 - Who was Charlie McCarthy?

- Who were Abbott and Costello? What is a Shadow serial, or a Three Stooges comedy short?

Create a page from the entertainment section of a newspaper from 1944. Then ask the students to consider what types of articles might appear on the front page of the newspaper. Would Alan be interested in the front page news?

2. Select three or four excerpts from children’s war memoirs such as *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *The Endless Steppe*, or *Zlata’s Diary*. Each excerpt should concentrate on a different aspect of the war experience. Divide the students into reading groups and give each group one excerpt to read. A representative from each group will assume the persona of the writer and participate in a panel discussion about children living in wartime. The other students in the class should ask the “writers” about their experiences and about how war has changed them.
3. Create a timeline on the classroom bulletin board that tracks Naomi’s growth. Instead of using dates to mark milestones, record quotes that demonstrate change. Students should have a miniature version of the timeline in their notebooks that they update as they read. At key points in the novel, the students will compare their timelines and discuss Naomi’s growth. The teacher will record these conversations by updating the classroom timeline.

Who else is changing? Draw a line parallel to Naomi’s timeline and ask the students to share their thoughts about Alan. Does he seem different? Create a second timeline that charts Alan’s maturation.

4. Choose two scenes from Alan’s visits with Naomi, one that depicts his sense of helplessness and another that portrays his love for her and his feelings of elation at seeing progress. Ask the students to circle those details that inform us of Alan’s feelings. Then show the students these scenes from the 1992 film of *Alan and Naomi*. Afterwards, the students can reflect on how the actor’s expressions and movements reinforced the mood.
5. Give the students a few minutes to respond to the following prompt in their journals: Think about a time when you saw someone who looked or sounded very different from you. What made this person seem different? How did you feel when you saw him/her?

When they are done writing, ask the students to make a list of all of the “differences” that Alan notices about Naomi. How does he initially feel when he is with her?

Have the students create a Venn Diagram that charts Alan’s and Naomi’s interests and personality traits. Was Alan correct in assuming that Naomi was so different?

6. Alan’s father is grateful that Alan is “free to play [his] games and forget supper” (16), but he encourages Alan to be compassionate to Naomi. The Torah also emphasizes the importance of remembering others even as we enjoy our own lives. Let’s explore how this dichotomy exists in the Jewish holidays.

Ask the students to brainstorm a list of the Jewish holidays and ask them to consider why we call these days *Yamim Tovim* (good days) and greet each other with a warm “*Hag Sameah*” (happy holiday!). What do we celebrate on:

- Succoth? (festival of the fruit harvest)
- Pesach? (festival of spring and new growth)
- Shavuot? (festival of the grain harvest)

Look at a copy of *Devarim* 16:1–17 and ask the students the following questions:

- a. How many times does the Torah use the word *simhah*, happiness? What does this tell us about the emphasis of the passage?
- b. Who are we commanded to include in our celebration? Why do you think that there is a special commandment to include the Levite, the proselyte, the orphan, and the widow in our celebration of the harvest festival? (Note: the Levites worked in the Temple and did not have their own portion of land.)
- c. Why does God remind us here that we were once slaves in Egypt?

Rabbi Menachem Leibtag’s essay on this chapter might be a helpful resource. You can find it at <http://www.tanach.org/dvarim/reay3.txt>.

Students can research *Matanot L’evyonim* and *Ma’ot Hitim*, two forms of tzedakah that are specific to Purim and Passover, and that remind us of our obligation to consider the weak and poor even when we are celebrating our own blessings.

V. WRITING ACTIVITIES

1. Since the story is deeply moving and sometimes upsetting, the students should have a space where they can record their questions and reflections. Students should keep a writing journal where they can respond to teacher prompts and, when they need to, simply work through their own feelings on paper. Encourage the students to write in their journals whenever they are moved or upset by the reading, and inform them that they should have a minimum of four entries over the course of the unit. Each entry should include two questions and one longer reflection.

Alternatively, you might require them to bring a question into class after they have read a particularly difficult section of the novel. The students should write their

questions on a piece of paper; the teacher will collect the papers, shuffle them, and distribute them randomly to the class. Then allow the students five minutes to respond in writing to their peer's question. The teacher can repeat the exercise until each student has had a chance to respond to a few different questions.

2. Instruct your students to rewrite a segment of the story from another character's point of view. Afterwards, the students can reflect upon how their chosen character understands the story differently, and how this new perspective changes their own understanding of the story.
3. Write a movie review of the film. How does the movie differ from the book? Does the movie do justice to the book? What changes might you make if you were producer?
4. Alan has multiple conversations with his dummy; he sometimes uses the puppet's voice to work through his own feelings. Imagine if Charlie McCarthy responded! What would he say to Alan? What does he think of everything that he has witnessed? Have the students rewrite one such dialogue.
5. Alan and Naomi have to write a brief character sketch of a friend or family member. Who will Alan choose to write about? Write the character sketch that Alan submits to Mrs. Landley.

VI. PROJECTS

1. What is a hero? Ask the students to define this term and to give examples of heroes. Alan believes that Naomi's father is a hero because he fought for the French Resistance. Explain what the French Resistance movements were fighting for, and ask the students if they agree that Naomi's father is hero.

Why does Alan's mother think of Alan as a hero? Do you agree? Are there any other characters in the novel that behave heroically? Ask the students to pinpoint one moment in the story when a character behaves heroically. Then instruct the students to write a poem memorializing this heroic act. Alternatively, students can write a feature article for a community newspaper about a local hero.

2. Draw a large circle on the bulletin board and explain to the students that the outside of the circle represents Naomi's public persona, and the inside of the circle represents those parts of her that most people don't know. Students should share their thoughts about what belongs inside and outside the circle while the teacher records their thoughts on the board.

Once this exercise is complete, every student will receive a piece of card-stock with the dimensions for an origami box. The students will decorate both sides of the card-stock; one side will capture their "inside," those pieces of themselves that others don't

know about them or that they prefer not to share. They will decorate the other side with quotes, pictures, and other decorations that capture their “outside,” or their public image. Once the students have completed their illustrations, they will follow the origami directions and complete the box so that their private reflections are on the inside.

Student can volunteer to share their boxes with their classmates. They can explain what the external decorations mean; some brave students might want to share something about themselves that their friends wouldn't know.

3. There are many *mitzvot* in the Torah that highlight the importance of *hesed*: visiting the sick (*bikur holim*), inviting guests (*haknasat orhim*), giving charity (*tzedakah*), returning lost objects (*hashavat aveida*), loving one's neighbor as oneself, just to name a few. There are some *mitzvot* that are specific to agricultural communities, such as *pe'ah* and *leket*, which require farmers to leave the corners of their fields and fallen produce for the poor.

Students, working independently or in groups, will research one such mitzvah and create an illustration that includes the following components:

- The Biblical verse that is the source of this mitzvah.
- One biblical story that captures the performance of this mitzvah.
- An interesting *halakhah* (law) that dictates our performance of this mitzvah.

When the students have completed their projects, they will hang them side by side along the wall of the classroom, thereby creating a Mitzvah Mural. Allow students time to examine each others' work and to discuss their research.

4. Choose a class *hesed* that allows the students to work together. You may want to call the local Jewish Federation for ideas of projects. If you are teaching sixth graders, you might encourage the students to think of this as a communal Bar/Bat Mitzvah project, and ask them to consider why this might be a valuable way to acknowledge their initiation into adulthood.

Dimensions of the "Inside-Outside Box"

