Holes

Study Guide

I. INTRODUCTION:

Be sure to read this novel before assigning it, or any other supplementary literature, to your students.

This study guide aims to provide material to help in the preparation of a lesson, unit or book club discussion about the novel *Holes* by Louis Sachar. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the concept *re'ut* (friendship) addressed in the Tishrei 5766 issue of BABAGANEWZ.

Holes is the story of Stanley Yelnats and his painful, funny, and ultimately triumphant journey; a story of Stanley's resilience and courage and a testament to the power of friendship. Stanley is unjustly accused of a crime. (He attributes his bad luck to a curse that began with his "no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-grandfather" and has since followed generations of Yelnats family members.) As a consequence for his alleged theft, Stanley is sent to Camp Green Lake, a strange correctional camp in the Texas desert where he spends his days digging holes in a dry lake bed to build his character. Stanley soon realizes that this isn't the real reason the "campers" are being subjected to such harsh treatment. The boys are digging holes because the warden is looking for something, and Stanley does his best to literally dig up the truth. The story cleverly weaves together past and present, local history with family lore. In his search for the truth, Stanley discovers a hidden treasure, the power of friendship, and his own inner strength. It is friendship, the reader learns, that ultimately has the power to reverse the century-old curse.

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

II. QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION:

❶ Describe Green Lake as it was one hundred years ago and as it appears at the time of Stanley's arrival.

❷ For what crime was Stanley sent to Camp Green Lake? Describe Stanley's version of the "theft".

❸ Why do you think that the boys at Camp Green Lake call each other by nicknames? Do you think that the nicknames given to the various characters are accurate? Why or why not?

❹ Do you think Zero and Stanley's exchange of digging for reading lessons was a fair one? Why did the other campers react so negatively?

❺ What do you think about the adult sin the novel? How do the grown ups in Green Lake affect the boys? How are parents in the novel portrayed? How are the adults in the flashbacks depicted?

❻ How does Zero make it up the final portion of the climb?

❼ What two important discoveries does Stanley make after tumbling into the gully near "God's Thumb"?

❽ Why did Zero steal when he was young?

❾ Explain the significance of Zero mentioning that his mother had sung a lullaby similar to the one Stanley's mother had sung to him.

❿ Explain the curse and how Louis Sachar refers to it at various points in the novel. How was the curse undone?

⓫How does Sachar weave together elements of the past and present into the narrative? Provide three examples. What are your thoughts on this storytelling device?

III. PASSAGES FOR CLOSE ANALYSIS:

"'C'mon Caveman, dinner,' said Armpit.
'You coming, Caveman?' said Squid.
Stanley looked around to see that Armpit and Squid were talking to him. 'Uh, sure,' he said. He put the piece of stationary back in the box, then got up and followed the boys out to the tables.
The Lump wasn't the Caveman. He was."
(p. 47)

How do you think Stanley feels when he realizes that he is Caveman? What is the significance of nicknames in the novel?

"Stanley was thankful that there were no racial problems. X-Ray, Armpit, and Zero were black. He, Squid, and ZigZag were white. Magnet was Hispanic. On the lake they were all the same reddish brown color – the color of dirt."
(p. 84)

What is it about their experience at Camp Green Lake that seems to transcend race? Why is race such a significant factor in the novel?

"As Stanley stared at the glittering night sky, he thought there was no place he would rather be. He was glad Zero put the shoes on the parked car. He was glad they fell from the overpass and hit him on the head. When the shoes first fell from the sky, he remembered thinking that destiny had struck him. Now, he thought so again. It was more than a coincidence. It had to be destiny."
(p. 187)

Why did Stanley think it was his destiny? Why is he glad the shoes hit him on the head? What has he learned about himself and others from his experiences at the Camp?

IV. LESSON IDEAS:

❶ Jewish sources on *re'ut*:
The following texts can be studied together as a class or in small groups. Another option is to divide students into small groups, giving each group one of the sources on friendship and asking each to prepare a short presentation to share with the rest of the class.

A. *Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their labor. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him that is alone when he falls, for he has not another to help him up* (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).

- According to the text, why are two better than one?
- Can you give an example of this teaching from your own experience?
- How does this text apply to *Holes*?
- Are there situations when it is better to be alone? When and why?

B. *I have learned much from my teachers, but from my friends more than my teachers…* (*Ta'anit* 7a)

- What lessons do you learn from your teachers?
- What lessons do you learn from your friends?
- Why are both kinds of lessons important?
- Who teaches what to whom in the novel? How does this text apply to *Holes*?

C. *Yehoshua ben Perahia taught: Choose yourself a teacher; Acquire yourself a friend; And make it your habit to judge every person favorably*. (Pirkei Avot 1:6)

- What does he mean by mentor?
- What role does a mentor play that is different than that of a friend?
- What are the challenges involved in trying to "judge every person favorably"?

- How did Stanley acquire his friends, at what cost?
- How did Zero choose a teacher?
- What are other instances of choosing teachers and acquiring friends in the novel?

❷ In *Pirkei Avot* 2:5, it is written:
"Hillel said: …Do not judge your fellow until you are in his or her place."
This teaching is re-enforced in *Holes* as Stanley's initial attitude towards Zero changes as he gets to know him and hears his story. The following activities are designed to build similar understanding and trust among students.

A. Trust/Team-building Games

- *Birthday Line-up*: Students line up in order of their birthdays (month and day) without talking.
- *Human Knot:* Each person grabs hands with two different people across a circle. The group then works to untangle itself.
- *Group Juggle:* Have the group stand in a circle, fairly close together. Toss a ball across the circle, calling out the person's name to whom you toss it. They then toss the ball to someone else and so on until everyone has caught the ball and thrown it once. Repeat the sequence a couple of times, maintaining the same throwing order. Add a second ball and then a third.

→ Questions: What were the difficulties involved in these tasks? What techniques and strategies did you use?

B. Icebreakers/Friendship-building

- Create a class covenant, generated by the students, that outlines ground-rules for creating a safe and respectful classroom space
- Student interviews: Ask students to pair up with a classmate who they don't know very well. They should take turns filling out a questionnaire contacting get-to-know-you questions (you can either use the questions below or brainstorm a list of interesting questions as a class). After completing the interviews, come back together as a class and ask students to share one interesting fact they learned about their partner.
  Sample questions:
  - When were you born? Where?
  - How many people are there in your family?
  - What do you like to do in your free time?
  - What is your favorite subject at school? Why?
  - What is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to you?
  - If you could be an animal, which would you be?
  - What is your favorite ice cream flavor?
  - What would you like to do when you get older?
  - What is your favorite time of year?

- *Yasher Koah* Sheets: *Yasher Koah*, literally translated as "go with strength" is a phrase used to acknowledge a person's good work or efforts. Part of building a

strong community is taking time to acknowledge the accomplishments and exceptional qualities of community members.

In this activity, have students sit in a circle and ask each to write their name on the top of a piece of construction paper. Students should pass their paper to the left. Instruct students to then write a "*yasher koah*" for the person whose name is listed on the top of the page. (For example: "Sarah, *yasher koah* on your class presentation yesterday" or "Josh, thank you for being such a good listener"). Keep passing the papers until they have gone once around the circle.

V. WRITING ACTIVITIES:

❶ Write an exposé of Camp Green Lake and the inhumane treatment the campers receive. Give examples from the novel of the ways that the camp strips the dignity of the campers. Include quotes from campers about the food, facilities, staff and daily activities. What good elements are there, if any, at Camp Green Lake?

❷ Write a letter as if you were Elya Yelnats to Madame Zeroni. Describe your life in America and explain why you chose not to marry Myra and why you didn't return to fulfill your promise to Madame Zeroni.

❸ Create a print ad for Sploosh, providing an overview of the healing power of onions and details about the potion's discovery.

VI. PROJECTS:

Any of the following activities can be done together or as a stand-alone to further explore the concept and characteristics of friendship:

- If Stanley's dad were to create a potion for friendship, what ingredients (i.e. qualities) would he include? Ask students to write a recipe including measurements and preparation instructions.
- Instruct students to create a map/maze outlining the obstacles to overcome and which landmarks they would pass in order to reach the final point: a strong, good friendship
- Using photos and magazine cut-outs, ask students to create a collage of their friends and family or one that representing their understanding of *re'ut*.