



# The Drama of Tanach

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For more information about the IJE Community Hebrew High Schools project and this curriculum development initiative, please visit our website:

[www.brandeis.edu/ije](http://www.brandeis.edu/ije)

## **Institute for Informal Jewish Education**

Brandeis University  
Community Hebrew High Schools Curriculum Development Initiative  
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## Course Description:

*(As listed in the Akiva High School Course Catalogue)*

Television shows like "The O.C." and "The Jerry Springer Show" seem like "Sesame Street" when compared with the tangled plotlines, complex relationships and problems faced by our ancestors in the Tanach! These aren't our elementary school stories: The Tanach is full of adult issues and leaves us with questions that beg to be explored. In **The Drama of Tanach**, we'll use dramatic games and improvisational techniques to uncover the motivations behind the choices, fill in gaps in the text, and create midrashim to help us connect with the text and decide how it speaks to our lives today. We'll also get a taste of how the great rabbinic commentators answered our questions, and discover how the text resonates in our time.

The primary goal of this course is to help high school age students connect with the text on a personal level. By using drama as the means to achieve this, students must bring their own experiences to their understanding of the text. This personalizes the text for them, making text study rich with meaning and relevancy. This approach encourages the students to "stand in the shoes" of characters in the stories, and engages them in lively discussion and improvisational dramatic exercises. The process of the class involves round-table reading and discussion, including identifying "gaps" in the text, (i.e. those things left unsaid in the *Pshat* of the text). The text study is followed by a dramatic exercise that involves exploring possible answers to their questions. The dramatic exercises are varied, but include *Bibliodrama*, (an approach to teaching Bible that combines psychodrama and creative *Midrash*); writing monologues from the perspective of a character; combining characters with similar or dissimilar issues into a scene; speaking the "thoughts" of an inanimate but important object in a scene (i.e. Moses' staff, the basket that held the baby Moses, fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, Cain's weapon, etc.); presenting conflicting perspectives of the same character in a situation and debating the possible truth of each; and much more. At times, classical commentaries and *Midrashim* are brought in which comment on the same issues uncovered by the students in discussion. This validates the students' work, and shows them that the study of text is timeless and relevant.

For each lesson or set of lessons, there is a life-question that is meant to be explored through the text study and dramatic exercises associated with the lessons. There may, and probably will, be other parallels to our lives that will be discovered through the process. I encourage you to explore as many connections as possible with your students. Each time they find a connection from the meanings in the stories to their lives, they are forging a bond with *Tanach* that will stay with them and strengthen their Jewish identity.

Think about the students in your particular class. What is their background? Day school or secular education? What is their Hebrew background? What are their grade levels? How much text study is in their experience? How much drama have they done? Why did they choose this class? Tailor your text study and discussions to be integrated with your particular class. Feel free to substitute other drama games (*see the appendix for additional games*) or add more Hebrew into your text study as appropriate to your and your students' particular comfort level.

Always pre-read the text you will be covering for that unit of lessons. Discern the questions and gaps for yourself, and identify issues of the characters. Imagine that you are the students, and attempt to predict their responses to the text from their particular experiences. Of course, there will always be surprises.

It will be a help to get some training or do a significant amount of reading about *Bibliodrama*. Peter Pitzele's book *Scripture Windows* is the best resource for an introduction to the process.

A classroom with a chalkboard will be helpful, and a table with chairs for the students to sit around is a good setup as well. The classroom space should also have an open area, or the ability to create one by moving furniture, for acting space and group work places.

## The Drama of Tanach

TOPIC/SUBJECT AREA: Bible study through drama  
 NUMBER OF SESSIONS/ COURSE: 15  
 LENGTH OF EACH SESSION: 1 hour

### **PURPOSES AND GOALS OF THIS COURSE:**

#### INTENDED BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES

- The students will be able to speak in first person as a biblical character after studying the text.
- The students will be able to explain several possible interpretations for the motives behind the characters' behaviors in the text.
- The students will be well-versed in the original Torah text through a good translation and/or the original.
- The students will be able to identify the issues present in a text and relate them to modern issues as a result of discussing the text from a first person narrative point of view.
- The students will be able to look at traditional *Midrashim* and compare and contrast it to the *Midrashim* created through our drama.

#### UNDERSTANDINGS

- The students will understand that the text is an exploration of real questions of meaning that are relevant to their lives.
- The students will understand that their first person interpretations of the text are oral *Midrash*.
- The students will understand that translations are always interpretations.

### **OVERARCHING QUESTIONS THE COURSE WILL EXPLORE:**

- What issues of family dynamics are reflected in the text and affect our biblical ancestors' behaviors?
- How do the characters relate to God, and what role does God play in their lives?

### **TEXTS:**

*B'reishit* and assorted commentaries. A modern language translation of *B'reishit* with the Hebrew available (JPS) seems to be the most "user friendly" in terms of English translation. Most sessions should work from the JPS for consistency.

SYLLABUS

SESSIONS	MATERIALS	QUESTIONS OF MEANING OR UNDERSTANDING	ASSIGNMENT DUE FOR THIS SESSION
SESSIONS 1 & 2	Adam & Eve (Gen. 2:5 - 3:24)	How do emotions affect the actions and relationships between people?	<p>No preparation is necessary, though reading the text ahead of time would be extremely ideal.</p> <p>For certain lessons, an email journaling assignment will be due.</p>
SESSIONS 3 & 4	Garden of Eden (Gen. 1:1 - 2:14), in various translations.	<p>How is separation a part of life?</p> <p>What do the two accounts of creation have to say about man and woman's relationship?</p> <p>How does translation affect our understanding of text?</p>	
SESSIONS 5 & 6	Cain & Abel (Gen. 4:1-16)	What motivates a person to make a sacrifice?	
SESSIONS 7 & 8	<p>Noah (Gen. 6:5 - 7:23)</p> <p>Selections from Midrash Rabbah (See Appendix A, page 91-93 for selected texts)</p>	How does being "chosen" affect relationships with family, friends and God?	
SESSION 9	Lech Lecha (Gen. 12:1-9)	What does it mean for someone else to make decisions that dramatically affect your life?	
SESSION 10	Review	What are some different ways in which a person relates to God?	
SESSIONS 11 & 12	Sarah & Hagar (Gen. 16:1-16)	What leads a person to take matters into one's own hands rather than wait for things to just happen?	
SESSIONS 13 & 14	Sodom & Gomorrah, Lot & his daughters (Gen. 18:16 - 19:38)	<p>How are we changed by our surroundings: the people with whom we choose to associate and places in which we spend our time?</p> <p>When does a higher purpose justify an immoral act?</p>	
SESSION 15	<p>Review Game: Pomegranates to Pomegranates.</p> <p>(See Appendix C, pages 100-107 for the cards)</p>	What issues face and affect our biblical ancestors' family dynamics?	

## Session 1 & 2, The Drama of Tanach

### I. Teacher's Preparation

#### UNIT QUESTION OF MEANING:

- How do emotions affect the actions and relationships between people?

#### SELECTION OF TEXTS:

1. Adam & Eve story (Gen. 2:5-3:24), JPS English/Hebrew translation recommended.

#### PREPARATION OF TEXTS:

1. Pre-read the text.
2. List gaps in the story, as well as inconsistencies, things that are not explained, or some obvious questions that arise for you as the reader. *See teacher's guide for examples.*
3. Use whichever questions you find interesting from the list provided and feel free to add your own.

## Teacher's Guide

### I. Teacher's Preparation

#### UNIT QUESTION OF MEANING:

I chose this question in order to have the students to reflect on the way they deal with their emotions, and how their emotions play into their own choices and relationships.

Studying the Adam & Eve story through examining impulses and emotions establishes a connection for the students to the text.

#### SELECTION OF TEXTS:

I use the JPS translation because I find the language to be accessible to high school students. It is also good to have the Hebrew for reference when questions come up that accessing the Hebrew can clarify.

#### PREPARATION OF TEXTS:

The following is a list of questions that should arise for you as the reader:

- How did Eve find out about the prohibition concerning the fruit?
- Why did the serpent want Eve to disobey the rule?
- Why did Eve add "or touch it" (Gen. 3:3) when speaking to the serpent?
- What went through Eve's mind before she made her decision to try the fruit?
- How did she get Adam to eat the fruit?
- Did God know what Adam and Eve had done at the time God asked the question?
- Was the serpent acting on free will, or was he commissioned by God to get Eve to break the rule?

- Was it a test?
- Was it God's plan?
- If so, why did God punish the snake?
- What is different about "knowing good and evil" verses knowing the difference between good and evil?

### OBJECTIVES/ INTENDED OUTCOME

Emotions are not always evident in the written text. Sometimes they are hinted at by the language in the story, and sometimes we have to provide the emotions of the characters based on our own life experiences, intuition and assumptions about why they act the way that they do.

### OBJECTIVES/ INTENDED OUTCOMES

#### 1. What will the students *do*?

- The students will **read and discuss** the text, **identifying** and **listing** emotions that the characters of Adam, Eve, the snake and God may have felt at each point in the selection.
- The students will **pair** an emotion from the list with Adam, Eve, Snake or God and **write** and then **read** a monologue that speaks as the character feeling that emotion.
- The students will **discuss** the idea of making an offering in modern times, and **relate** it to this story.

#### 2. The students *will be able to*:

- **Explain** how they believe that the emotion that they chose affected the **actions** and **relationships** of the character at that moment in the text.

#### 3. The students *will understand*:

- **Emotions often lead to actions** in our lives and may affect relationships that we have with family and friends.

### ASSESSMENT/MEASUREMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES:

1. Observe their behavior and focus as the students work in their groups.
  - a. Were the students able to complete the assigned list?
  - b. Did the students engage in the discussions about the text?
2. Ask the students how many emotions they were able to perceive from the clues in the text.
3. Ask the students what they thought about reading the text with a specific focus in mind.

### ASSESSMENT/MEASUREMENT OF INTENDED OUTCOMES:

**Measuring the objectives** can be done by observing the students' participation as they **read** and **discuss** the text and compile the **list** of emotions.

The teacher can also assess the quality of the students' **monologues**. Hearing the students' explanations of how emotions play into their own relationships and actions will help the teacher to ascertain if the Students can personalize the lesson of this text study.

You will want to set expectations for group work.

Observing their focus and productivity while in groups will help you to decide for future classes how to divide students into more productive learning groups.

By asking the students what they thought about reading the text in this way, you will encourage them to reflect on their own thinking as they were reading.

Hopefully, it will seem different for them to read text with a specific focus in mind, and it may encourage them to discover nuances that they had never seen before.

## II. The Lesson Plan, Session 1

### A. WARM UP ACTIVITY: **Emotional Announcement Game**

This activity is a fun icebreaker, and is a good warm-up to the lesson. While it is not text-based, it introduces the theme of how speaking with emotional intent can change the meaning of neutral words.

Choose whatever emotions from my list you'd like to use, and add or change it as you see fit based on your own class makeup.

### B. INTRODUCTION

Give this introduction to orient the students to the goal of hypothesizing the characters' emotions based on their words and actions.

## II. The Lesson Plan, Session 1

### A. WARM UP ACTIVITY: **Emotional Announcement Game** (5-10 min.)

1. Write the following on the board: Bob Dobbins, Mr. Bob Dobbins
2. Whisper one of the following emotions to each student, or hand them out on a slip of paper for the student to read and keep private:
  - a. anger
  - b. disappointment
  - c. surprise
  - d. fear
  - e. love
  - f. lust
  - g. curiosity
  - h. confusion
  - i. sorrow
  - j. jealousy
  - k. deception
  - l. rage
  - m. frustration
  - n. discomfort
  - o. joy
  - p. apathy
3. Each student, individually, must recite the words on the board verbatim, using the emotion that they were assigned.
4. The other students should attempt to guess the emotion after each student does their part.
5. Afterward, briefly discuss how speaking the same exact words in different emotional tones suggested meaning *beyond* the words.

### B. INTRODUCTION (15 min.)

1. Tell the students: "We just played a game that tells you that the tone of what you say can give meaning to the words. What happens when we have a text and can't hear the tone in which the words are spoken? We will explore what happens when we put an emotional tone on the words and actions of the characters in a story from our text."

2. Explain to the students that:
  - a. We will be exploring the role of emotions in the story of Adam, Eve, the snake, and God.
  - b. We will look at how emotions affect the actions and relationships between the characters.
  - c. We will then take a broader look at the role of emotions in our lives, and what factors influence how we deal with them at different stages.
  - d. We will read the text together first, and then in groups.
  - e. Each group will re-read the text focusing on a particular character and list the possible emotions felt by that character throughout the selection.

### C. TEXT STUDY (15-20 min.)

1. All the students should sit in a circle around a table with the teacher as a part of the circle.
2. Begin reading the story out loud. Ask for volunteers to take turns reading. Everyone should have a text and should follow along.
3. The teacher should interrupt frequently to discuss questions, and encourage other students to do so as well.

### D. ACTIVITY: **Group Reading for Emotions** (15-20 min.)

1. Divide the students into groups of two or three. Give each group a marker and a large piece of paper.
2. Assign each group a different character: Adam, Eve, Snake, or God.
3. Instruct each group to re-read the text, focusing on that character only, and make a list of emotions possibly felt by that character in every moment in the story.

The students now have a motivation for re-reading the text, even if they have studied it before or feel they know it already.

### C. TEXT STUDY

When the text study is done with everyone including the teacher sitting in a circle, it establishes mutual respect and the idea that we are all working towards a common goal.

Asking for volunteers to read also avoids embarrassing any student who feels uncomfortable reading aloud.

Allowing interruptions for questions insures that gaps will not be glossed over or forgotten as the text is being read, and also encourages the students to pay attention.

### D. ACTIVITY: **Group Reading for Emotions**

You may want to assign the groups yourself based on making ideal pairings for productive work sessions.

Decide based on your knowledge of the class dynamics whether to divide them yourself or let them choose their *hevrotah* partners.

When the groups are listing emotions, you may want to stop and ask the students if there is a hint in the text that made them choose the particular emotion they wrote. That way, you can be sure that they are really trying to think “as” the characters, and not just listing random emotions.

It also encourages the groups to stay on task when you circulate and give each group some attention.

#### E. CLOSURE

Letting the students know that we will work further with the lists of emotions will hopefully get them looking forward to the next class.

Asking them to self-reflect on how their emotions influence their own interactions can encourage them to make connections to the characters in the text. The connections can be made by finding similarities in their own behavior to those they observed in (or attributed to) the text.

*They should not write the character’s name at the top of the paper, but rather **the emotions**. Encourage them to be as thorough as possible in their list.*

4. Circulate to each group at least twice to be sure they are on task and looking deeply into the text. *They shouldn’t be just listing “happy” and “sad,” etc., but finding adjectives that are more descriptive of **levels** of those emotions, such as “joyous” or “discouraged.”*
5. Each group should come back with a list of at least 25-30 emotions.
6. Collect the sheets at the end.

#### E. CLOSURE (5 min.)

1. Tell the students that next session we will use these lists to explore further the question of emotions and actions.
2. Ask them in the coming week to make mental notes of the ways they interact with others when feeling any of the emotions from their lists.