

Mini Lesson: Mesorah



Subject Area: Jewish identity, Holocaust education

WATCH Page Topic Area: Religion/Religious Life

Topic: Mesorah: The link between generations

Duration: 30 minutes

Grade Level: 8th to 10th Grade

Learning Aim: As a result of this lesson, students will:

- Identify the meaning of mesorah
- Deepen their understanding of the transmission of Jewish ritual and practice
- Deepen their understanding of survivor experiences,
- Identify the primary and central ideas presented in testimony, and enhance their listening and communication skills.

Description of the lesson: In this lesson, students will examine Mesorah, which is often used to describe the passing on of traditions, and their own role as links in a long chain of Jewish tradition and practice. Through exploring a text from the Torah and viewing clips of testimony from Holocaust survivors, students will deepen their understanding of the meaning within familiar Jewish rituals and make connections between their own Jewish experiences and those of previous generations.

Consider

- **Begin by providing students the following definition:**

Mesorah is a term often used to describe the passing on of observances or group of laws and practices.

- **Ask students:**

- What rituals are you familiar with that have been passed down from generation to generation?
- What memories of a food, a holiday, or a tradition do you think you might like to pass on?

- Project the following text at the front of the classroom. Share the following: We see mention of the passing on of traditions with Moses in the Torah

- **Ask a student to read the passage outloud to the class:**

תָּסֻבְךָ יִשְׁנֹאֵל הוֹרָסָם מֵאִיבָנוּ, מֵאִיבָנָל מִיִּנְקָזוּ, מִיִּנְקָזָל עֲשׂוּהִיוּ, עֲשׂוּהִיל הָרָסָמוּ, יִנְיָסָם הָרוֹת לָבָק הָשָׁם
הָרוֹתֵל גִּיס וְשָׁעוּ, הָבָרָה מִיִּדְמִלֵּת וְדִימָעָהּ, נִדְבָּ מִינֻתָּם וְיָהּ, מִיִּרְבָּד הָשֵׁלֶשׁ וְרָמָא מָה. הָלוֹדָגָה

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua, and Yehoshua to the Elders, and the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples and make a fence for the Torah. (Pirkei Avot 1:1)

Consider (continued)

- **Ask:** What do you think this passage means? How does it connect to the concept of Mesorah?
- Share with students that all of us are links in a chain that continue the transmission of Torah and ritual from generation to generation.
- **Add-on activity for teachers:** *Bring a chain into class and pass it around. Ask students to feel the chain and describe what makes it a chain. What are the qualities of a chain?*
- Lead a discussion as a class around the following questions:
 - At what point in a Jewish person's life do you think you become part of the chain?
 - How do rituals keep people together? In what ways do they help us to connect?

Collect

- Share with students that when Holocaust survivors discuss the memories of their lives before the war, many of their stories paint a picture of time spent with parents, siblings, and friends. They describe sensory memories of smells, sounds, sights, and tastes that remain with them. That time and those memories are connected to rituals and practices that have become mesorah and include observing Shabbat in their homes, attending synagogue, celebrating holidays, and all of the foods that they enjoyed.
- Continue by saying that in their testimonies, Holocaust survivors share that in some cases, the memory of traditions played a role in sustaining them throughout the ghettos and the camps.
- Hand out biographies for each of the survivors that students will be introduced to in the following clips of testimony. Read each bio together prior to viewing each clip.
- Direct students to focus on key words/phrases and encourage them to take notes on what stands out to them about the rituals each individual shares:
 - **Ernst Neugroschl** explains that despite the hardship they were faced with every day, his father still made the effort each and every Friday night to say the blessings for Shabbat and to break bread.
 - **Zalman Schachter-Shalomi** describes the process of preparing a shofar for Rosh Hashanah while in an internment camp.
 - **Barbara Fischman Traub** shares her experience of observing Yom Kippur in Auschwitz and women singing Kol Nidre.

Collect (continued)

- Once students have finished watching the clips ask the following:
 - What ritual or tradition does each survivor describe? Where did these memories take place?
 - What is the significance of this event to the individual? Why do you think these survivors, in times of such difficulty, still observed these rituals and engaged in religious practice?

Construct

- **Write the following prompt on the board (or pass out the prompt to students)**
Write a paragraph about a ritual that you observe and the memories that accompany it. Fully paint the picture, complete with descriptions of sounds, smells, tastes, etc. and share why this ritual is so important to you.

Communicate

- To close the session, have students divide into pairs and share their paragraphs with a partner.
- Ask them to consider and discuss the ways one might hope to pass down these tradition on to generations that follow. Use the following question:
 - Do we have a responsibility to pass on the traditions that we were raised with? Why?

Biographical Information



Ernst Neugroschl was born in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia on March 21, 1928 where he grew up in an orthodox Jewish family. During the war, Ernst's father was able to leave Bratislava. They managed to hide, moving from the homes of peasants and farmers, to various structures in the woods. His family was eventually arrested and they were sent to Sachsenhausen. He was deported to a series of concentration camps in Germany. He was liberated from

Sachsenhausen by Soviet armed forces.

His interview took place on October 14, 1996 in Silver Spring, Maryland.



Zalman Schachter-Shalomi was born in Zolkiew, Poland on August 17, 1924. He grew up in a Chassidic Jewish family that was part of the Belz Chassidism. Prior to the war, Zalman's family moved to Austria and placed a high importance on his education. He particularly enjoyed learning languages and the sciences. As things became increasingly difficult, his family tried to flee to Belgium, and then turned to smugglers in Germany to try and get to France. During the war,

in 1941, his family managed to flee from France via North Africa to the US Virgin Islands.

His interview took place on March 23, 1998 in Boulder, Colorado.



Barbara Fischman Traub (née Golda Fischman) was born September 7, 1925 in Sighet, Romania. The youngest of four children, she had two brothers and a sister. When anti-Jewish measures were enacted in Romania, she was expelled from the high school in Sighet and transferred to a Jewish school in Cluj, until her education was interrupted by the 1944 German invasion of Romania. In April 1944, the Fischman family were among the approximately 10,000 Jews

from Sighet ordered into a ghetto on the outskirts of the city. This ghetto was liquidated in mid-May and Barbara was deported to the Auschwitz II-Birkenau death camp in Poland, where she performed forced labor for about six months.

She was then transferred to the Weisswasser concentration camp in Czechoslovakia where she was liberated by the Soviet armed forces in May 1945. After liberation, she married Martin Stauber and moved to the United States. Several years later, the couple divorced. In 1957, she married Herman Traub, with whom she had a son, Ralph. Barbara is dedicated to Holocaust education and is a published author.

She was interviewed on March 27, 1995 in New York, NY, USA.