

Journeys of Discovery

Written by the 2003-2004 NFTY Board

For the UAHC Biennial Youth Leadership Track

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Introduction

By Adam Roe, NFTY Programming Vice-President

As Jews in North America, we NFTY-ites have a long history of what has brought us here. Unfortunately, it is a history that we are not always aware of. The purpose of this program is to explore and discuss some of the journeys that our ancestors- and at time we, ourselves- have traveled.

Jews have been a Diaspora people for nearly two thousand years. Many things come along with being a scattered people; diversity of culture, foods, languages, music, histories, and experiences. Two prominent themes are conflicts (both inside and outside our communities and selves) and journeys (both individually and as a people). We need not look further than our own family stories to see that ours is a history of conflicts and journeys. This program explores two specific instances of conflict and journey that relates to many of us. The first is Jacob's journey to Beth El, and the second is the pogroms that befell Russian Jewry at the end of the 19th century.

Goals:

1. To explore the theme of the November 2003 UAHC Biennial, "*Lech L'cha: Sacred Journeys of Discovery.*"
2. To discuss and learn about the physical journeys our ancestors traveled during the 1800's or 1900's that brought our families to the United States.
3. To study the conflict in Eastern Europe that forced many Jews to emigrate west.
4. To discover the individual physical, spiritual, and religious, and emotional journeys we have taken and will take in the future

Objectives:

1. PPs will study texts pertaining to Russian pogroms, Jacob's journey from Torah, and a personal narrative of the pogroms.
2. PPs will reflect internally and discuss with others their personal journeys.

Time Table:

- 00:00-00:05 Break into groups
- 00:05-00:20 Program leaders read and perform text and stories about the Russian pogroms and Jacob's journey.
- 00:25-00:55 Discussion
- 00:55-1:05 Write on poster
- 01:05-1:10 Wrap-up

Materials:

- Large pieces of poster board
- Markers
- Copies of program for Groupleaders
- Songleader (for wrap-up)
- Handouts (attached)

People:

- Groupleaders (1 groupleader per 7-10 participants is ideal).
- Timekeeper and/or program leader

Detailed Procedure:

00:00-00:05 Break into groups

PP's will be assigned a letter. The groupleaders will spread out around the room, and each will hold up a piece of paper with the respective group's letter on it. After all the PP's are given a letter, they are asked to find their group. PPs will sit down in their respective groups in the same room in order to watch the skit

00:05-00:15 Groupleaders Perform Skit and Readings

4 Groupleaders will perform the skit (See **Text 1**, attached).

After the skit, the groupleaders, stationed around the room with their respective groups, will each stand and read one phrase/line to the group at large (See **Text 2**, attached). Readings are to be done sensitively and dramatically to suit the material.

00:15-00:25 Groups Read Personal Narrative

Groupleaders will distribute the personal narrative (See **Text 3**, attached), and each group will read it. (NOTE: The choice of reading method – i.e., aloud vs. silent, one reader vs. several – will be made by the program leader.)

00:25-00:55 Discussion

Groupleaders lead their groups in discussion about the previous presentations and narrative.

Discussion questions:

1. What have been other physical journeys and conflicts of the Jewish people? What other Jewish journeys have been catalyzed (or triggered) by conflict?
 - A few historical examples:

- Holocaust
 - Russian Pogroms
 - Spanish Inquisition and Expulsion (late 15th century)
- Biblical examples:
- Exodus out of Egypt (1250 B.C.E – *although please note that the historicity of the Jews in Egypt is not proven.*)
 - Babylonian Exile (586 B.C.E.)
 - Destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.)
2. What is the significance of journey and conflict as an ongoing theme throughout Jewish history? In other words, what is the importance of studying stories of ancient journeys of the Jewish people? Why study the more recent journeys and conflicts?
 3. The conflicts mentioned above were traumatic for the Jewish people, but the journeys that followed were essential and formative to Jewish identity in subsequent generations. Certainly, the American Jewish community would not be as large and vibrant if not for the persecution that forced our families westward. How do we reconcile the sorrow we feel when we remember the suffering of our ancestors with the seeming comfort and security we enjoy today? Can we cherish the outcomes while cursing the conflicts that brought them about?
 4. How have we, as American Jews, learned from past conflicts to make our lives here more secure?
 - Group leader might suggest the following ways:
 - Creating organizations to unify the Jewish community (e.g., Federations, Denominational movements (e.g., Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist), JCCs, etc.);
 - Establish defense organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League, which serves to fight anti-Semitism and other forms of group-hatred; and
 - Forming strong political organizations to represent the interests of the Jewish community in the United States (i.e., American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), American Jewish Committee (AJC), American Jewish Council (AJ Council))
 5. Have any of you interviewed or talked with family about their families' history, travels, and journeys? On what journeys have the you and your family traveled? From where do your families originate?
 6. Do you feel personally connected to these journeys? Why or why not?
 7. What conflicts shape your personal Jewish journey?
 8. What do you see future Jewish journeys looking like?

00:55-01:05 Write on posters

PPs are asked to draw or write about their families' – and their own personal – Jewish journeys (past, present, and future) on large pieces of butcher paper or poster board. (One piece of paper is given to each group.)

01:05-01:10 Wrap-up

The program leader discusses how, on this piece of paper, the PPs in this program have created a picture of their generation's Jewish journey. Their successors will look upon their journeys just as the PPs themselves study the history of journeys of generations before them. (NOTE: Depending upon the appropriateness of the program location, the program leader may decide to hang the posters on the walls of the room, after the conclusion of the program.)

Led by a songleader, the participants will join together to sing "Lech L'cha" (Debbie Freidman).

Text 1 (Skit): *Jacob's Journey to Beth El*

Four groupleaders present the following skit:

God (to Jacob): 'Set out and go up to Beth El. Remain there and make an altar to Me, the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau.'

Jacob (to his family): 'Get rid of the idolatrous artifacts that you have. Purify yourselves and change your clothes.' We are setting out and going up to Beth El. There I will make an altar to God, who answered me in my time of trouble, and who has been with me on the journey that I have taken.'

Narrator: They gave Jacob all the idolatrous artifacts that they had, even the rings in their ears. Jacob buried them under the terebinth tree near Shechem. *(Pause)* They began their journey. The terror of God was felt in all the cities around them, and they did not pursue Jacob's sons. *(Pause)* Jacob and all the people with him came to Luz in the land of Canaan - that is, to Beth El. *(Pause)* He built an altar there, and he named the place Beth El's God (El Beth El), since this was the place where God was revealed to him when he was fleeing from his brother. *(Pause)* Now that Jacob had returned from Padan Aram, God appeared to him again and blessed him.

God (to Jacob): 'Your name is Jacob. But your name will not be only Jacob; you will also have Israel as a name.' *(Pause)* 'I am God Almighty. Be fruitful and increase. A nation and a community of nations will come into existence from you. Kings will be born from your loins. I will grant you the land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac. I will also give the land to your descendants who will follow you.'

Narrator: God went up and left Jacob in the place where God had spoken to him. *(Pause)* Jacob had set up a pillar in the place that God had spoken to him. He now offered a libation (liquid used in sacrifice) on it, and then poured oil on it. *(Pause)* Jacob had named the place where God had spoken to him Beth El (God's Temple). *(Pause)* They moved on from Beth El, and were some distance from Ephrath when Rachel began to give birth. Her labor was extremely difficult. When her labor was at its worst, the midwife said to her,

Midwife: 'Don't be afraid. This one will also be a son for you.'

Narrator: She was dying, and as she breathed her last, she named the child Ben-oni – My Sorrow's Son. His father called him Benjamin.

Narrator: Rachel died and was buried on the road to Ephrat, now known as Bethlehem. Jacob set up a monument on her grave. This is the monument that is still on Rachel's grave. *(Pause)* Israel traveled on, and he set up his tent beyond Herd Tower (Migdal Eder).

Text 2: Fact Sheet on Russian Pogroms

Group leaders will be stationed around the room. Each will read one phrase/line. Readings are to be done sensitively and dramatically to suit the material.

1. The word 'Pogrom' is derived from the Russian 'to wreak havoc', to riot or cause devastation. It is most often applied a series of mob attacks on Jewish people and their property in the late 19th and early 20th century.
2. The first modern Pogrom is considered to have taken place between 1648-52 in which over 100,000 Jews are thought to have been murdered.
3. In 1881, the Czar Alexander II was assassinated by radicals. Jews were blamed; 200 individual Pogroms ensued. (http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=108759)
4. Pogroms were few before the assassination of Alexander II in 1881; after that, with the connivance of, or at least without hindrance from, the government, there were many pogroms throughout Russia. Soldiers and police often looked on without interfering. These pogroms encouraged the first emigration of Russian Jews to the United States. (<http://www.lupinfo.com/encyclopedia/P/pogrom.html>)
5. In 1903, a three day violent outpouring of hate led to 49 deaths and 700 homes looted in Kishinev, Moldova, as troops stood idle. This Pogrom started after the murder of a Christian child was falsely blamed on Jews - it turned out that the child had been murdered by a relative. Mass hysteria quickly took hold of the population and inflamed them to commit acts of irrational violence. (http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=108759)
6. The Russian pogroms (1881-84 and 1903-06) resulted in heavy Jewish emigration to Western Europe and the United States. Because of the pogroms, the profile of the Russian Jewish immigrant differed greatly from that of the German Jew. The latter came largely as single men; the former were entire family groups.
7. The wave of Jewish Immigration from Poland and Russia to the United States in 1904 was the largest. The Czarist Government restricted Jewish settlement to the Pale of Settlement, an area stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. These Jews were largely urban, having lived in towns and villages, called shtetls.
8. Among such communities were Warsaw, Odessa, Lodz and Vilna -- towns and people later to be obliterated by the Holocaust. Jews in the Pale had restrictions placed on their means of employment; the majority were merchants, shopkeepers and craftsmen.
9. Russian Jews comprised the last great wave of immigrants coming to America. They settled in urban centers. Predominantly industrial proletariat, many raised capital and proceeded to go into business. They brought with them a rich Yiddish culture expressing itself through journalism, fiction, poetry and the theater.
10. Between the two World Wars, Jews continued to join their families in the United States.
11. Pogroms resumed in force during the thirties in Hungary, Mexico, Poland, Rumania and Germany. During the Holocaust, the pogroms were meticulously planned beginning with Kristallnacht (1938)—“the night of shattered glass.” (http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=108759)
12. After the Holocaust, thousands of European Jews, without homes, entered the United States. (www.myjewishlearning.com)

Text 3: A Personal Narrative of the Russian Pogroms (Anon.)

It was the winter of at the turn of our century. Another pogrom had begun, and the Jews in my home were preparing for another onslaught of death, simply because of our religion.

The name of the shtetl, it doesn't matter. It could have been anywhere. It could have been next door to you or you. Or perhaps half way across the world. But it wasn't. It was my home this time. It had been before, and it would be again.

I had managed to correspond with some relatives across the border secretly. They offered me and my family safety and security, or rather more than our current institution granted us.

I was scared. Scared for my family, scared for my village, scared of spies, scared of death. So what was I to do? I did what I thought was best.

Time slowly passed, the sun went down, and the snow rose towards the sky. The snow drifts were like mountains in the wasteland night. I gathered my children all together and my sister. We quietly and slowly walked out of the doorway into the dark.

We left the graves of those who came before us and that had lost to the outbreaks of violence we wished to shed.

The children were controlled but visibly worried. They didn't really know why we were leaving, but they understood enough to be scared. We mounted the sled, with small bags of our personal possessions and rode off. The scene of the village in the distance was serene, calming, yet inexplicably intertwined with a path of sorrow and pain.

We continued, I am not sure how far. It felt like days, it may have only been a few hours. I can't tell. I was careful to avoid the patrols that so often carried nomads like us from the hands of salvation to jail and death.

We arrived safely, narrowly escaping the sights of several questionable travelers. Across the border, and found our way to our new shelter. I counted the children. One was missing. Perhaps in all of the chaos he had fallen. Or been caught. Oh dear god.

My sister saw my fear and remounted one of our horses. She took a risk, and I pleaded with her not to go. But she left. It was a long time waiting, and thinking, praying, and worrying. I heard a horse approach and the heavy breath of a cold child. She had found him, a little angel lost in the cold desert covered in the ashes of his ancestors, waiting to find his way to a life deserved and earned tenfold by the suffering of those who came before him. We warmed him up, and welcomed him back, as we were as well welcomed into our new life.

Wherever the story goes from there, it matters not. But what matters is that my parents and my children fight every day of their lives so that we can have that better tomorrow. We leave what we once had behind. Why? Because we cannot move forward without vision enough to remember our past, even if we cannot hold it in our hand. Our hearts are our strongest when we are at our weakest, when we fight and survive, we give that much more to our children.