

## **Exploring Our Connections To Jewish Life**

### **Lesson plan for family/congregational education**

*This lesson plan is part of a larger lesson entitled “Wrestling with God and Jewish Tradition,” which can be found at*

*<http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/jan06/>.*

*In this session, youth and adults will consider when and where we feel most connected to Judaism. With which environments, traditions, and texts do we connect? Are there environments, traditions, or texts that we feel less comfortable with? We will look at Helène Aylon’s artwork and discuss what it reflects about her feelings of connection with or estrangement from Judaism. Using Aylon’s technique of tracing over traditional text, we’ll create our own pieces of art to convey our unique experiences of connection with Jewish text and tradition, and share these within family/congregational groups.*

Materials you will need:

- Helene Aylon’s “Self Portrait” image, copied twice onto transparency sheets (image can be found on the above website)
- Two overhead projectors
- White art paper (preferably 12x18 construction or drawing paper)
- Enlarged copies of blessings and phrases in Hebrew and English that you think your group might have strong connections with, such as: Shehechyanu, Birkat Hakohanim, candle lighting blessings, Havdalah blessings, Shema, the first line of the Amidah, blessings for the Torah, the Hashkivenu paragraph from the evening service, the Mourner’s Kaddish, Nishmat Kol-Chai from the morning service, etc.
- Assorted art materials: markers, crayons, glue, colored paper, tissue paper, scissors, etc., including black pencils or pens

**1. Begin by telling the story of Jacob** to all the participants, gathered in a comfortable space:

*Once there was a man named Ya'akov. Ya'akov means "heel." Who would name a child "heel?!" His parents named him Ya'akov because he was a twin, and he came out of the womb holding onto the heel of his brother, Esav. Ya'akov and Esav did not get along. They fought as kids, and as adults they were separated for many years. During those years, Ya'akov worked hard. He worked on his relationship with God. He worked on his relationship with people. He worked for his father-in-law, Lavan. He got married to Leah and Rachel and their two maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah (it was ok to do that back in those days). He had twelve sons and a daughter.*

*After many years of working for Lavan, he wanted to journey back to his homeland. But he knew he would have to cross through the land where his brother, Esav, lived. He was scared. The night before he encountered his brother, he sent his family ahead of him and he was alone. That night he wrestled with a man until the break of day. As the dawn broke, the man asked Ya'akov what his name was. Ya'akov told him, and the man said, "Your name will no longer be Ya'akov, but Yisrael. Yisrael means 'to wrestle with God' for you have wrestled with God and with men." The man was actually an angel, who blessed Yisrael. Yisrael called the name of the place "Peni'el" which means "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved." The next day, Yisrael met Esav, and they made peace with each other.*

**2. Ask the following questions** and take answers from both youth and adults:

- Why do you think God's angel gave Ya'akov a new name?
- We have many ancestors, including three patriarchs and four matriarchs. Why are Jews called "Bnai Yisrael," the Children of Yisrael, specifically?
- What does it mean to wrestle with God? Do you think a lot of people wrestle with God in one way or another?

**3. Conclude the discussion with the following thoughts:**

- Ya'akov had a strong relationship with God, but also struggled with his responsibility as a human being in relationship to God. He began a long tradition of Jews being able to question and to struggle.
- Sometimes we struggle with our responsibilities as people in relationships, to ourselves, our family members, our communities, to Judaism, to our world, and to God. Other times we feel just right, comfortable with being Jewish, being ourselves, being in our families and communities and in our world.
- Today we'll look at an artist who expresses her feelings of comfort and struggle, and then we'll consider our own times of feeling most comfortable in Judaism, and finally we'll use some of the artist's techniques to create our own personal art projects on these themes.

**4. Split the group into adults and youth**, and facilitate the two groups separately.

**With adults:**

- Introduce Helene Aylon's "Self Portrait" from "The Digital Liberation of God." Project the transparency image onto a screen so that everyone can see.
- Ask the group what they see in the image, what feelings it elicits, and how they think this image speaks to Aylon's sense of being comfortable with or not comfortable with Jewish tradition — or both. They might notice, for example, the expression on Aylon's face, the Hebrew words flowing over her, the traditional religious dress and hair-covering, the title of the piece, as evidence of her stance as insider or outsider.
- Now give the group the information on the artwork from Aylon's statement and biography. (You can download a PDF with the statement and bio from the main page of this month's edition of *Go & Learn*, <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/jan06/>.) Then ask if this information changes their sense of Aylon's relationship to Judaism.

- Other questions for discussion can include:
  - How is Aylon expressing the struggle she feels?
  - Is she withdrawing from, confronting, or advocating for change within Judaism?
  - Is this artwork a respectful way of expressing the tension she feels about Jewish tradition?
  - What is the effect of projecting the Biblical text onto herself?
  
- Next split the adults into small groups. Facilitate the discussions by asking each question out loud in appropriate 1-2 minute intervals and asking groups to share with each other:
  - When do you feel most connected to Judaism? (Maybe it's when you light candles with your family; when you're in Israel; anytime you're with your extended family; when you're doing volunteer work; it's when you take your morning walk...)
  - What are the elements that make you feel most connected in this environment?
  - Who/what did you feel connected to when you're in this space or time: yourself? your family/friends? everyone in the world? God? Jewish history and ritual?
  - How did you express that feeling of connection? Keep it to yourself? Tell your friends/family? Decide to keep more traditions or go back to that place more often?
  - Have there been times when you have struggled with your Judaism or felt less comfortable being Jewish?
  - If so, where were you at these times? Who were you with?
  - Who/what did you feel alienated from: yourself? your community? your family? God? the long tradition of Jewish history and ritual?
  - How did you express that sense of struggle?
  
- When the groups are done sharing, ask them to think about how they might portray their relationship with Judaism in a piece of art, as they walk back to the big-group space.

**With Youth:**

- Project Aylon’s “Self Portrait” onto a screen, and ask students:
  - What do you see in this image?
  - Do you think she feels inside or outside of Jewish tradition, or both? Why? (Notice her expression, the Hebrew words pouring over her, her traditional religious dress and hair-covering...)
  - Do you think Aylon is struggling with something about her Judaism? What is it?
- Explain Aylon’s story and her statement about the artwork. Ask students to consider:
  - Does this information change your ideas about Aylon’s relationship with Judaism?
  - What did Aylon have to know and understand in order to create this artwork? (Hebrew, Torah, how it feels to be an Orthodox Jewish woman, art, feminism....)
- Next split the youth into groups of two or three. Facilitate the small group discussions by asking each question out loud in appropriate 1-2 minute intervals and ask groups to share with each other:
  - When do you feel most connected to Judaism? (Maybe it’s when you light candles with your family; when you’re in Israel or at camp; when you come to synagogue or when you’re outside on a hike, looking at all the beautiful scenery...)
  - What are the things that make you feel most connected in this environment?
  - Who/what did you feel connected to when you’re in this space or time: yourself? your family/friends? everyone in the world? God? the long history of Jewish history and ritual?
  - Are there times that you feel less connected to Judaism? What or when are those times?

When the groups are done sharing, ask them to think about how they might portray these ideas in a piece of art, as they walk back to the big-group space.

### **5. Art project:**

With everyone back together, ask participants to sit with their families (or in inter-generational groups of congregants) around tables with the art materials and copies of texts. Ask them to keep their recent discussions in mind: 1) When or where do they feel most connected Judaism? 2) Do they sometimes struggle with elements of Judaism? 3) What element of Jewish tradition or community would they like, someday, to feel more comfortable with?

Next, demonstrate the art project:

- 1) Draw on the paper either a self-portrait (an image of your face) or a scene that reminds you of the time/place you feel most connected to Judaism.
- 2) Add other elements to the picture that symbolize that connectedness with Judaism. For example, you could add a havdalah candle to remind you of doing havdalah at camp or bricks that look like the Kotel in Israel or a Torah to represent your sanctuary at synagogue.
- 3) Think about how you will represent, if you want to, something you struggle with in Judaism. You might use images, symbols, or text to show these.
- 4) Choose a piece of text that you want to include in your self-portrait, either as a symbol of your connection to or struggle with Judaism. Think about your relationship to the text and how you can portray it in your artwork. To add text, use the copies of blessings and other texts, and either cut them out to add to your picture or copy them onto your artwork.

When participants have finished their artwork, ask families to share with each other what they have created.