

Challenging God from Inside the Tradition

Lesson plan for high school

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/>.

This session explores what happens when we feel conflicted about elements of Jewish tradition. Most of us have experienced the feeling of being happily, wholly inside of Jewish tradition as well as being at odds, uncomfortable, or feeling outside of the tradition, whether because of rituals, theologies, or rules with which we disagree. What are the different ways to express this discomfort? What changes have been made to Judaism and by whom? We will look at the art of Helène Aylon, whose “Self-Portrait” from “The Digital Liberation of G-d” at once shows her familiarity with, and her conflict with, Jewish sacred text. Finally, we’ll consider our long tradition of being “B’nai Yisrael,” Children of Israel, who “wrestle with God.”

1. Begin the session with the following exchange:

- Raise your hand if you’re usually happy that you’re Jewish.
- Raise your hand if you agree with everything about Jewish tradition.
- Raise your hand if there are things about Judaism you would like to change.
- What would you change if you could? (Take a few answers.)
- Do you all agree that those would be helpful changes? Does anyone think it would *not* be positive to change these things? Why? (Possible considerations: The rest of the community might not agree; these changes would make this community significantly different from other Jewish communities; traditions are important to continue, etc.)
- Do you know of changes that have been made to the tradition? (Possible answers: Bat mitzvah; Women counted in the *minyan* and

allowed to read from torah; Mixed seating in synagogues; Efforts to include intermarried families, gay Jews, etc.; Adding matriarchs to liturgy; Adding new tunes to prayers, such as Debbie Friedman's *Mi Sheberach* tune; Creating new liturgy.)

2. Explain that these are all examples of modern changes in liberal Jewish/non-orthodox communities, but there were historically many other changes in Judaism, especially during the Rabbinic period. Also, the formation of new movements — Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and even Modern Orthodox — are all examples of communal choices to incorporate more modern approaches to Judaism.

3. Discuss: Who do you think helped make the changes you listed above? What do you think was important to them?

(Possible answers: Women, feminist Jews, Jews who want to remain strongly connected to/involved with Jewish life but feel alienated by certain issues, language, or rituals in traditional Judaism. Emphasize that only people truly dedicated to Jewish life and the future of Judaism would work to create these changes; those not dedicated would leave the community instead.)

4. Discuss: Do you think these changes were made quickly or slowly? Do you think everyone agreed that these changes were necessary or helpful?

(No changes are made immediately; and all movements require a community process that takes time to discuss and debate. Examples: more than 90 years passed from the time the Reform movement began discussing the possibility of women becoming rabbis to the time that the first woman was ordained. On the other hand, once changes are institutionalized by a movement, they become so accepted that it is hard for many congregations now to imagine a time when girls did not become *b'not mitzvah* or there were no women rabbis.)

- 5. Discuss: When you feel connected to some of the traditions of Judaism but not others, what are your options?** Take suggestions, and then weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the options: withdraw from the community; choose to remain involved in the community despite discomfort; try to change the things you aren't comfortable with on a community level; create new personal rituals; find a different Jewish community that meets more of your needs, etc.
- 6. Introduce Helène Aylon's "Self-portrait."** Summarize or ask your students to read Aylon's biography and her statement about this artwork from JWA's online exhibit "Jewish Women and the Feminist Revolution," found at <http://jwa.org/feminism/index.html?id=JWA002>. You can also see her artwork and download a PDF of the statement and bio on the main page of this edition of *Go & Learn* (<http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/jan06/>).
- 7. Show students Aylon's "Self-Portrait" and ask them to discuss:**
- What does Aylon want to change about Jewish tradition?
 - Is it possible to change these aspects of Jewish tradition? How?
 - What did Aylon have to know and understand in order to create this art installation? (Hebrew, Torah, how it feels to be an Orthodox Jewish woman, art, feminism....)
 - 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 hair-covering...)
 - Is Aylon withdrawing from, confronting, or advocating for change within Judaism?
 - Is this artwork a respectful way of expressing the tension she feels about Jewish tradition?
- 8. Ask students what it means that Jews are called "B'nai Yisrael."** (Elicit answers: the Children of Israel. What does "Yisrael" mean? Wrestling with God.)

- Why do you think this is our name?

9. End with the following thoughts:

Jacob 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 who also struggle with our responsibilities as humans — to ourselves, our communities, our world, and to God. There are many ways to struggle. We can show our struggle through personal practice, through advocating for community change, or even through art. Judaism has already accommodated many changes; we can even see evidence of change in our own congregations and communities. The most effective changes have been made by people who remain involved in Jewish community and love many of its traditions.

Possible follow-up activities:

- Interview older members of your congregation who witnessed changes in ritual at the synagogue. Ask about how those changes were made, who initiated and worked for them, how long they took, and what were the memorable parts of that process.
- Look at other artwork by Helène Aylon. One good page with many images of Aylon's work and interesting commentary is Ruth Ost's "Intimate Architextures: Letters to Helène Aylon," which can be found at <http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/cf/ruth/Finalintrox.htm>
- Learn about other Jewish women who have challenged their communities to change at the JWA web exhibit "Jewish Women & the Feminist Revolution" (<http://www.jwa.org/feminism>).