

Tefillin Barbie: Body image and gender roles in Judaism

Lesson plan for junior high or high school

This lesson plan is part of a larger Go & Learn lesson entitled “Tefillin Barbie: Considering gender and ritual garb,” which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/jan08/>.

1. Begin the session by showing the students the picture of Tefillin Barbie (which can be found on the above website), and gather initial responses to begin the discussion. Some points to touch on:
 - What is she wearing, and why might the creator (Jen Taylor Friedman) have chosen a Barbie doll to model her *tefillin*?
 - Jen Taylor Friedman is one of the first *soferot* (female ritual scribes – this means that she writes everything from *tefillin* scrolls to whole Torahs). How might this have influenced Jen to create this doll and put her out on the internet for the world to see? What is she trying to say?
 - Would you have chosen a different doll/model?
2. Since the students are likely to be familiar with Barbie, this is a good time to discuss both Barbie as a toy that has lasted through several generations of little girls, and its creator, Ruth Handler – a Jewish businesswoman. Have students look at excerpts from Handler’s obituary in the *New York Times* (excerpts reproduced in appendix). The article discusses Handler’s motivation for creating Barbie as well as some of the criticism of and resulting changes in Barbie’s image. Guiding questions for your discussion are below:
 - Why did Ruth Handler create Barbie? What was she hoping to accomplish?
 - Why has Barbie become so political? What are people on both sides of the issue concerned with?

- What do you think of the changes that Barbie has undergone over the past few decades? Are they meaningful?
 - Do you agree with Ruth Handler's assessment that "Barbie always represented the fact that a woman has choices?"
 - What do you think about the critique of Barbie that suggests that her unrealistic body measurements can cause low self-esteem in girls?
 - What else in our culture might contribute to poor body image and low self esteem in girls?
3. You may use this next piece in addition to, or instead of the article on Ruth Handler. Both are helpful starting points for leading a discussion on the issues and complexities of presenting unrealistic images of bodies. (Either way, you will want to connect this discussion back to the image of Tefillin Barbie, and ask the participants why Jen Taylor Friedman may have chosen to use Barbie as her model.)

In 2004, the company that makes Dove products decided to embark on a campaign that showed women with a variety of more realistic body types than one typically finds in advertising or in fashion magazines. Use their short (2 minute) film "Onslaught" as a jumping off point for a conversation about some of the same issues and choices that faced the creators and purveyors of Barbie. (To view the video, go to: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ei6JvKOW60I>)

Below are some questions to help guide your discussion:

- Why is this short film entitled "Onslaught?" Why does the film move at such a quick pace?
- Why does the movie begin and end with young girls?
- Why do you think boys/men are left out of this film? Do you think this is fair? If not, what are some of the issues that face young boys who are growing up in today's society?
- If you were to "talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does," what would you want to tell her?

4. On Barbie and Jewish Ritual

On a blank wall in the room where your discussion takes place, you should place four signs: “Strongly Agree,” “Somewhat Agree,” “Somewhat Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree.”

Begin a discussion on Jewish ritual and the roles of men and women by allowing the students to consider their own thoughts on the place of gender in Jewish ritual. Read the following sentences to your students. For each statement, students should stand underneath the sign that best represents their thinking on the issue. If they are between signs, that is also OK. Do not stop to discuss each statement, but rather have students move through all of the statements and then call them together to discuss the choices they made.

- Both men and women should wear a *tallit* at services.
- Men should, but women should not wear *tallit*, *kippah* or *tefillin*.
- Both men and women should wear *tallit*, *kippah* and *tefillin* if they choose to.
- Women should participate as equals in leading services and counting in a *minyan*.
- *Tefillin* look weird on women.
- *Tefillin* look weird on *both* men and women.
- Only men should do *hagbah* (lifting of the Torah to put it away.)
- There should be some differences in the roles of men and women at synagogue.
- Men and women should both wear *tallitot* or *kippot*, but they should look different.

Once the students have finished moving through all of their choices, gather them together and lead a discussion on why they stood where they did in response to each statement.

Particularly for those who stood in between two signs, what was the thinking behind that choice? Were all of the students' choices uniform, or were there some who thought there should be different roles for men and women in Jewish ritual but that the choice should always be open to either gender?

5. Paper dolls

This activity can be as labor intensive as you choose to make it. It will require you to have for each student two drawn out figures – male or female – with only simple clothing on. (You may be able find paper doll outlines online. Here is one website that provides some:

<http://marilee.us/paperdolls3.html#Printadults>).

Next, have students take fashion magazines and/or a sheet with Jewish ritual objects on them (everything from *tallit* and *tefillin* to a Torah and rabbis' manual) that you have given them, and cut out the objects and place them on their 'doll.'

When they are done, have them share what they did and why. This should lead to an interesting discussion about some of the issues they had to think through when deciding what to put on their doll. Are all of their choices traditional in terms of gender? Did all of them go against tradition? In either case, ask them why they made those choices. Were they just trying to make a point, or did they think theirs was a realistic representation? Does their paper doll represent what they themselves do? Why or why not? How does this exercise help them in thinking about real people and the decisions they make every day regarding issues of ritual, or even in their daily, secular lives?

Note for the teacher: If you prefer not to do paper dolls, you can also have the students make a male collage and a female collage, using magazines and pictures you will provide. This will still allow for a very rich discussion of what 'belongs' in which space.

Appendix: Excerpts from *New York Times* obituary of Ruth Handler, April 29, 2002.

(Entire article can be viewed at:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C04E5DB1F3EF93AA15757C0A9649C8B63>)

Ruth Handler, Whose Barbie Gave Dolls Curves, Dies at 85

By Sarah Kershaw

...In 1959 when she invented Barbie, a busty figure with platinum-blond hair and piercing blue eyes, Mrs. Handler created the country's first mass-marketed adult-looking doll for girls -- and an image that would later be attacked by feminists as a symbol of objectification and repression. Critics said the doll gave girls misguided goals, whether for their careers or for their own physical development.

Mrs. Handler, though, seemed unmoved, her husband said. "It really didn't bother her," he said. "She thought they were wrong."

"Every little girl needed a doll through which to project herself into her dream of her future," Mrs. Handler said in a 1977 interview with *The New York Times*. "If she was going to do role playing of what she would be like when she was 16 or 17, it was a little stupid to play with a doll that had a flat chest. So I gave it beautiful breasts."

Barbie was conceived as a teenage fashion model, and her first outfits were named for her various activities, according to M. G. Lord, author of "Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll." Early outfits included "Friday Night Date" and "Sorority Meeting."

And Barbie kept pace with the times. During Camelot, she sported a Jacqueline Kennedy hairdo. During the civil rights movement, Mattel created Barbie's first black friend, "Colored Francie."

But not until the 1970's, as the criticism from feminists materialized, did her career choices -- and her outfits -- begin to change to include a doctor, astronaut and veterinarian, among others.

A chief objection of feminists, including the National Organization for Women, was that Barbie's figure created unrealistic expectations for young girls that could lead to low self-esteem. People often joked that Barbie's measurements were not humanly possible. But in fact it was determined that if the 11 1/2-inch doll were 5-foot-6, her measurements would be 39-21-33. One academic expert calculated that a woman's chances of having Barbie's figure were less than 1 in 100,000.

In her 1994 autobiography, "Dream Doll: The Ruth Handler Story," Mrs. Handler wrote: "My whole philosophy of Barbie was that through the doll, the little girl could be anything she wanted to be. Barbie always represented the fact that a woman has choices." ...