#### *Pigeon*

#### *(*[*2004*](http://www.imdb.com/year/2004/?ref_=tt_ov_inf)*) Director:* [*Anthony Green*](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm2119908/?ref_=tt_ov_dr)*, Writer:* [*Anthony Green*](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm2119908/?ref_=tt_ov_wr)*, Stars:* [*Michael Lerner*](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0503627/?ref_=tt_ov_st)*,* [*Wendy Crewson*](http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0187724/?ref_=tt_ov_st)

1. When does the story take place?\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
2. What clues reveal the setting (time and place)?
3. Who is the antagonist(s)? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Who is the protagonist(s)? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Why didn’t the writer/director name them?
4. Where do you predict the man is going? What does the purchase of a one-way ticket imply? What clues does the filmmaker include to show that the main character is leaving illegally?
5. How would you describe the main character’s emotional state? What clues lead you to this description?
6. What personality traits do the characters display? What scenes in the film support your ideas?
7. Do you think it was dangerous for the man to make a commotion with the boys and the pigeon? Why do you think he didn’t simply ignore them?
8. Do you think the woman was Jewish? What Jewish values are reflected in her actions?
9. Explain why the woman helped the man? Should she have? Why didn’t anyone else help?
10. How much time did she have to make her decision to assist the stranger? What were the potential short-term or long-term consequences of her decision?
11. Were her efforts of resistance successful? What evidence supports your prediction?
12. Question why the guards believed the woman. What does their response indicate?
13. Connect the actions of the young boys to something you have witnessed. How do you explain these actions and motivations?
14. Why do you think the filmmaker made this film? What do you think the director wants people to take away from it? Why is it called “Pigeon”?

**Take Away Activities**

* The film was based on a true story. Investigate the background and note the similarities and differences between the historic account and the film.
* Select any character from the film and tell his or her backstory based on your knowledge of this place and this time period.

Jewish Values

The climactic moment of the film, when the woman steps forward and speaks for the protagonist, is a remarkable illustration of a central Jewish tenet: the obligation to save a life.

Kindness to others (gemilut hasadim) and repairing the world (tikkun olam) are also traditional values that are reflected in the characters’ actions. The selflessness exhibited by the man when he saves the pigeon from the boys, and by the woman when she saves the man from the Nazis, are both acts of gemilut hasadim and of tikkun olam.

Saving a Life

Like most Jewish values, the value of saving a life has its origin in traditional Jewish texts.

Jewish text study is traditionally carried out with a partner, so, in pairs, read and discuss the following excerpts.

**“He who saves a life, it is as if he has saved the whole world.”** — Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4.5

1) What is the surface meaning of this text? Does this make sense? What is the deeper significance of this text? How does this text relate to real world situations?

Here’s one interpretation to consider:

“At first, these words make no sense: how can saving one person’s life be just as miraculous and meaningful as saving billions of lives? Comparing one life to the well-being of the entire world makes it clear that each single life is infinitely precious; expending the energy and risk to save one life emphasizes that each life is worthy of such energy and risk. Allowing someone to die, on the other hand, suggests that life is cheap and that no one — and by extension, the whole of the world’s population — is worthy of being saved from an untimely death.”

2) What do you agree or disagree with in the interpretation?

**“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have placed before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life…”** — Deuteronomy 30.20

1) What does it mean to “choose life?” What situations would require someone to “choose life?”

2) What if choosing life means choosing not to follow other commandments?

In Judaism, nothing is considered more important than the **mitzvah** of saving a life — even when that means breaking a law. Doctors, for instance, are obligated to perform life-saving surgery on Shabbat. People using life-sustaining medicines are obligated to break the fast on Yom Kippur to take their medicine. This suggests that maintaining your own life is just as important as saving someone else’s. If people know that they have the opportunity to save a life, either their own or someone else’s, they shouldn’t let anything stand in their way.

1) What is Shabbat? Why is it notable that doctors would work on Shabbat?

2) What is Yom Kippur? Why would people not take medicines or break their fast on Yom Kippur?

**Historical Background**

France During World War II

*Pigeon* takes place in France, in 1941. Prior to World War II, France’s sizeable Jewish population was largely assimilated into French society. Some held high positions in government, finance, and the entertainment industry. At the same time, however, as in many countries, there were strong currents of anti-Semitism among the French population.

Historically, France had been a safe haven for immigrants, including Jews fleeing persecution and pogroms in Eastern Europe in the 1800s. The country repeatedly opened its doors again after World War I, Hitler’s rise to power in Germany, the adoption of the Nuremberg Laws, and the Anchluss. By the time the film takes place, there was an ever-growing population of immigrants, and the French state began to make a distinction between long-established French citizens and the newcomers. France’s poor pre-war economy and increasingly shaky immigrant relations led to anti-immigrant feeling and incursions on the rights of Jewish immigrants.

World War II began as a result of unprovoked German aggression directed at Poland in September of 1939. By June 14, 1940, the German army had occupied Paris and defeated the French, splitting the country between the German-occupied North and non-occupied South. An interim French government headed by Marshal Pétain was established at Vichy in the southern zone. Pétain and the Vichy government blamed foreign nationals, particularly Jewish immigrants, for France’s defeat. Hundreds of foreign Jews were expelled from the free zone, with hundreds more interned in camps.

The Setting of *Pigeon*

The film’s main character was traveling from Remies to Grenoble. Remies, just outside of Paris, was the headquarters of the German operation in 1940s occupied France. As a Jew, the main character would have been subject to the numerous anti-Jewish regulations passed by the Germans in occupied France. Jews were divested of property and their businesses were in effect stolen and given to non-Jews. Unemployment skyrocketed; it was nearly impossible for Jewish families to afford the barest essentials.

Grenoble was close to the Italian and Swiss borders, placing it well inside the free zone. However, the regulations of the new French regime at Vichy were little better than on the German side, and Grenoble’s proximity to the border might have allowed the protagonist of the film to escape France — or even Europe altogether. By 1941, when the film takes place, a Jew in Vichy France could not hold government office or any other prominent public position, could not own property or operate a business, and could not participate in doctors’ and lawyers’ guilds. The citizenship of significant segments of the population was repealed altogether, including the sizable group of Algerian Jews who had been considered citizens for 75 years.

By 1941, Jews were not allowed to cross the border between occupied and non-occupied France. To ensure this, all persons in the occupied territories were issued special identification cards (the “papers” the SS guard in the film calls for on the train). The papers of a Jewish individual were marked with a bright red stamp that said Juif, French for Jew. In order to cross the heavily guarded border safely and travel undisturbed through the free zone, the main character had to have proof that he was not Jewish.

**Take Away Activities**

* Explore these terms: Vichy France, Nuremberg Laws, Anchluss, free zone, guild, passport, visa
* Identify any other words or terms that were new to you.

Using Film in the Classroom

Why use this film, or any film, in your teaching?

Written texts -- novels, textbooks, articles, memoirs -- are common fare in our classrooms. We use these texts to teach content, build literacy and critical thinking skills, and instill an appreciation for the literary arts. The written word is an invaluable educational resource and its usefulness cannot be overstated. But our educational efforts are enhanced when we broaden our definition of “text” to include other, non-written documents. Film -- the moving image -- is one form of text whose potential is often under-utilized. *Much like written texts, media texts can communicate content, build literacy, elicit critical response, and inspire an appreciation for the arts while allowing for an immediate, shared experience from the audience*.

Communicating Content

Moving pictures are powerful communicators. Much of what our students know about their world, they’ve learned from television, film, and other audio-visual texts. *Help them critique what they see*. By incorporating film into our educational process, we can tap into the power of moving images to communicate content -- whether it’s information about life in a specific place or time, background about the experiences of a particular individual, or a new perspective on current social issues.

A film can function as an introduction to a unit of study -- inspiring emotion and raising provocative questions while grounding students in a historical moment. Or it can serve as a conclusion -- offering one author’s (director’s) take on a subject that students have already become immersed in. Within a unit, films can serve as stimuli to further discussion and research, and offer opportunities to make connections across curriculum areas. *Films also have the capacity to reach students, especially visual learners, who may have difficulty accessing other types of texts*. A variety of media offers a variety of avenues for students to connect with the content they need to learn.

Building Literacy

A writer chooses words carefully, and constructs each sentence, paragraph, and chapter to communicate a specific message. Similarly, a filmmaker uses a very particular language -- a visual language constructed through camerawork, editing, and sound design -- to communicate with an audience. And if film is a language, we need to help students develop the skills to “read” it.

What is the filmmaker’s point of view, and how does he or she express it?

How does the choice of framing, pace, music, color, etc. affect the narrative?

The ability to read a film can have far-reaching implications. *Students who are media literate are able to engage more competently and critically in their environment*. Media is too important and pervasive an element of our society for students not to be skilled in deconstructing its messages.

In addition, media literacy skills can be applied to other types of literacy. Active interpretation of film, like written texts, requires an understanding of character, theme, plot, and symbolism.

*A student who learns to predict, infer, ask questions, and make connections in film brings those same skills to the interpretation of written texts*.

Questions and text compiled from: Reel Learning. *Pigeon*. <http://www.avodaarts.org/index.php?page=pigeon>. 2014.

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