

CLASSROOM TOOLKIT

Films About the Jewish Experience

In collaboration with Common Sense Media, ADL's Media & Entertainment Institute curated collections of [Movies That Illustrate and Celebrate the Jewish Experience](#). The collections are part of ADL's ongoing effort to ensure that the vibrance and variety of Jewish life and experience are accurately represented in media and entertainment. Common Sense Media's original Jewish film list, "Movies That Illustrate and Celebrate the Jewish Experience" now features 31 titles, while the "Movies About the Holocaust" list includes 14 titles, with plans to add more.

Films provide entertaining, rich, complex and evocative narratives for students to learn about Jewish people and the Jewish experience. Learning about the Jewish experience through film—including the joy, beauty, culture, history and hardship—helps to provide mirrors for Jewish people to see their own experiences reflected and as windows for others to learn about and appreciate the diversity and richness of Jewish life and history.

This film watch toolkit includes:

1. Words and definitions to help with the discussion and activities.
2. Discussion questions and writing prompts.
3. Classroom and teaching activities.
4. Additional writing ideas for students.

Words and Definitions You Might Use

Ally: Someone who speaks out on behalf of or takes actions that are supportive of someone who is targeted by bias or bullying, either themselves or someone else.

Antisemitism: The marginalization and/or oppression of people who are Jewish based on the belief in stereotypes and myths about Jewish people, Judaism and Israel.

Bias: An inclination or preference, either for or against an individual or group, that interferes with impartial judgment.

Culture: The patterns of daily life learned consciously and unconsciously by a group of people. These patterns can be seen in language, governing practices, arts, customs, holiday celebrations, food, religion, relationships, family roles, communication style, clothing, etc.

Genre: A category of artistic composition, as in music, film or literature, characterized by similarities in form, style, or subject matter

Identity: The qualities, beliefs, etc. that make a particular person or group different from others.

Implicit Bias: The unconscious attitudes and stereotypes and unintentional actions (positive or negative) toward members of a group merely because of their membership in that group.

Stereotype: An oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences.

Trope: A common or recurring pattern, message or device that repeats throughout history.

For additional terms and definitions, see [ADL's Education Glossary Terms](#).

Discussion Questions (Can also be used as writing prompts)

Below is a collection of general questions you can ask about any of the films. These questions are intended to help students understand, make meaning of and think critically about the film—especially about the Jewish experience. The questions can also be used as writing prompts.

You can ask all of the questions or choose a subset of the questions to engage students in a discussion about one or more films. The list includes questions about plot, theme, characterization, film elements, how the Jewish experience is portrayed, how the film perpetuates or dispels stereotypes, the complexity of the film's characters in terms of their Jewish or other identity, etc.

Note: These discussion questions can also be used to engage adults, or a mixed group of young people and adults, in conversations about the films.

Beginning Questions

- What happens in the film? What is the film about?
- What thoughts and feelings came to mind as you watched the film?
- What is the message of the film? Do you agree or disagree with that message and why?

Jewish Identity and Experience

- How does the film portray the Jewish experience?
- To what extent is there a diversity of Jewish characters in the film? Are Jewish people portrayed in one general way or are there a diversity of Jewish people with different identities (i.e., age/generation, gender, race, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc.)? Were they portrayed with accuracy, depth and complexity?
- In the film, are Jewish characters portrayed in stereotypical ways? Are stereotypes about Jewish people dispelled or challenged in the film? Or both? Please explain.
- What did you learn about Jewish people and the Jewish experience from the film?
- When was the film made? What time period is it depicting? For its time period when the film was made, do you think it was it ahead of (or behind) its time in terms of its portrayal of Jewish people?
- Does the film address anti-Jewish attitudes and antisemitism? How so? Do you think the film is effective in addressing antisemitism? Please explain.
- The significance of a film is often determined by the power of its message about the human condition. What do you think this film is saying about what it means to be human? What it means to be Jewish?
- In what ways is this film a mirror (see your identity and experiences reflected) or a window (learn about others) narrative?

Characterization, Place and Tone

- How does the director develop the characters? What characteristics are revealed and how?
- If you had a chance to ask a character in this movie a question, what would it you ask?
- What is the director trying to show about time and place?
- What is the tone or mood of the story?
- How does the tone help guide the viewers into an empathic reaction to the story? Can you give examples?
- If you were directing the film, what would you do differently?

Emotional Response

- What was the strongest emotion that you felt while watching the film?
- What scene or character struck or moved you (emotionally) the most from the film?
- Which character did you (admire, hate, love, relate to, pity, find confusing) the most? What was it about that character that caused you to have that reaction?
- What part of the story told by the movie was the most powerful? Why?
- To what extent did you connect to the film's characters, storyline or message? Please explain.

Final Thoughts

- What is your biggest takeaway from watching the film?
- Would you recommend this film to a friend? If so, what would you say about it?
- Did you enjoy the film? Why or why not?

Classroom/Teaching Activities

1. **Film Festival.** During Jewish American Heritage Month or other times during the year, organize a Jewish Experience Film Festival and together watch and discuss films about Jewish people and the Jewish experience. You can show a film every week during the month, have students watch films on their own, or do a school-wide film festival and show several films each week. To engage students and others more actively in the process, create an organizing committee of students, families and staff where they decide on the films, set the schedule and publicize the event.
2. **Concentric Circles.** Have students all watch individual films (from the [Common Sense Media](#) list) the evening before. Then engage them in a concentric circles activity by having students count off by twos and then inviting the #1's to form a circle in the center of the room, facing outward. Then invite the #2's to form a second circle outside the first circle and to face a partner in the inside circle. Have students take 1-2 minutes each to share with their partners the film they watched. Then you will instruct students in the outside circle to "move" and they will move one person to the right to face a new partner. This will allow students to learn about many movies in a short period. You can have each partner share what the film was about and their biggest takeaway (positive or negative) or you can give them a few individual questions (see discussion questions above) for students to share their responses with their partners.
3. **Rating Rubric.** As a class, create a film rating assessment rubric to use when rating films. Engaging students in creating a rubric will help them consider and analyze criteria for rating films. First, decide on five overall categories for which you will rate the films (e.g., Portrayal of the Jewish Experience, Visual Effects/ Cinematography). Then divide students into five small groups, assigning each group one of the categories. In their groups, have students come up with a 1-5 rating (1: unsatisfactory, 2: needs improvement, 3: meets expectations, 4: exceeds expectations and 5: outstanding/excellent) for their category. For example, one category may be "Portrayal of the Jewish Experience." That small group's task will be to describe in a sentence or two each, on a scale of 1-5 (5 being the best), how the film portrayed the Jewish experience. After each group creates their scale, reconvene the class and invite comments and additional suggestions before finalizing the rubric. You can then have students and others use the rubric to rate films. This will provide an opportunity to use the rubric, provide feedback and improve it.

- 4. Mock Interviews.** Have students explore characters in a film by working together in pairs to write and perform a “mock” interview. One student will play the role of a character in the film and another student will play the role of an interviewer. They will then perform the interview with the class. The answers should reveal the values, personality traits and perspective of the character. An alternative is to have one person play the role of the film director and the other student will interview the film director about the movie.
- 5. Analysis of the List.** As a class, analyze the collection of films about the Jewish experience. First, compile a list of films beginning with the movies on the [Common Sense Media](#) website. Then, invite students to identify other films by searching online and asking friends and family. Continue to add to the list until you've got 40-60 films in all. Then using movie blurbs and descriptions, categorize the list into several categories such as (1) film genres (i.e., comedy, romance, drama, action, science fiction, animated, etc.), (2) decades the films were produced, (3) whether they were directed by a Jewish director, etc. If time permits, invite students to delve deeper and have them each read reviews of 1-2 of these films to learn more about the film, including how the film portrays the Jewish experience and to what extent tropes and stereotypes are perpetuated in the film. After compiling all of this data, discuss the list of films and examine to what extent the films as a whole portray the Jewish experience in its complexity, what the films are missing and what additional films are needed to make it complete.

Note: You can use this same process and invite students to analyze another identity group and the film collection about that group.

Additional Writing Ideas

- 1. Text-to-Self.** Engage students in text-to-self writing. Text-to-self writing is a personal connection a reader (or viewer in the case of films) makes between a piece of text (or film) and the viewer's own experiences or life. The writing can be a poem, short essay, song, spoken word, etc. Writing prompts for text-to-self writing include: *What does this remind me of in my life? What is this similar to in my life? How is this different from my life? Has something like this ever happened to me? How does this relate to my life? What were my feelings when I read this?*
- 2. Movie Review.** Have students write a movie review about one or more of the films they watched. First, invite them to read other movie reviews as an example (mentor text) and explore together what was included and not included in the review, how it was written, etc. Then have them write movie reviews and them share with the class, compile those to make available in the school or community, create an online forum for writing their reviews, or write a social media post about the film or make a TikTok (as appropriate) of their film review.
- 3. New Scene.** Invite students to select a film they watched and identify a scene they found compelling, concerning, or noteworthy. Invite them to re-watch the scene several times and consider how they would change the scene and then write a short script of their new iteration of it. Alternatively, they can also write a scene they think should have been included in the film but wasn't and they can write a script for that new scene they think should have been part of the film. Then invite students to share their updated or new scenes with the rest of the class.

4. **Then and Now.** Have students watch two films of the same genre (i.e., comedy, romance, drama, action, science fiction, animated, etc.) that were produced at least 20 years apart (e.g., a film made in 2023 compared with a film made in 1995). Compare and contrast the two films in terms of how Jewish people and the Jewish experience are portrayed, the cinematic features, the message of the film, character development and other important features of the film. Students can also find film reviews of the film made then and now and compare what the two reviews during different time periods said about the film and the different aspects they focused on.
5. **Imagine a New Film.** Invite students to consider and imagine a long or short film they might make about the Jewish experience. Brainstorm those ideas and then have students develop a concept paper or outline for the film that includes the theme, plot, characters, cinematic elements, message, etc. If time permits, have students begin to create a script for their imagined film.

Note to Teachers: There is also a list of [Movies About the Holocaust](#) on Common Sense Media's website. However, keep in mind that when teaching about Jewish people and the Jewish experience, Holocaust films should never be the sole film or narrative shown to portray the Jewish experience. While those films are important in teaching about the Holocaust, they should not be shown or used in isolation when illustrating the experiences of Jewish people. It is important to show films that also encompass the joy, beauty, culture and history of the Jewish experience.

Common Core Anchor Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
<p>Reading</p> <p>R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.</p> <p>R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.</p> <p>R7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.</p> <p>R9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.</p>
<p>Writing</p> <p>W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.</p> <p>W2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.</p> <p>W3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.</p> <p>W4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</p> <p>W6: Use technology, including the Internet, to produce and publish writing and to interact and collaborate with others.</p> <p>W8: Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.</p> <p>W9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.</p>
<p>Speaking and Listening</p> <p>SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.</p> <p>SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.</p> <p>SL3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric</p> <p>SL5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.</p>
<p>Language</p> <p>L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.</p> <p>L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.</p> <p>L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.</p>

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.
Self Management: The abilities to manage one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations and to achieve goals and aspirations.