



**Teaching Torah to Teens: The Three Patriarchs and
Four Matriarchs
by Charna Rosenholtz**

Subject Area: Torah, Jewish identity, values
Multi-unit lesson plan
Target age: 12 – 15 year olds

Lesson Objectives:

- 1. Students will be able to find chapter/verse in the Torah with ease*
- 2. Students will learn basic text study skills*
- 3. Students will understand the role of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs in the development of Judaism*
- 4. Students will learn how to apply Torah stories and its lessons to their every day life*
- 5. Students will develop an interest and curiosity for further Torah study*

The Bible is not an end but a beginning: a precedent, not a story. It is not an epic about the life of heroes but the story of every man in all climates and all ages. Its topic is the world, the whole of history, containing the pattern of a constitution of a united mankind as well as guidance towards establishing such a union. It shows the way to nations as well as to individuals. It continues to scatter seeds of justice and compassion, to echo God's cry to the world and to pierce man's armor of callousness.
AJ Heschel

Teaching Patriarchs and Matriarchs to Teens

Engaging the students includes creating an atmosphere for study that is both conducive to learning and enticing to the imagination. Suggestions for each and every lesson:

- Set up the space, using things like tablecloths on tables, candles, and healthy snacks.*
- Choose texts (see attached lessons). Look up pesukim, discuss the text, and reflect upon its meanings.*
- Study key stories and look for the moral lessons. Help the students deduce themes in the stories.*
- Keep things in historical perspective, comparing then and now.*
- Talk about everyday life and our version of the tensions and conflicts. How do we deal with these things now?*



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- *Discuss personal narrative in relationship to the text.*
- *Use a combination of lecture, discussion, bibliodrama (see Lesson One) and small group breakout sessions.*

Notes to teachers:

1. *Be sure to completely familiarize yourself with the text before class. The students ALWAYS ask insightful questions, and the greater your familiarity, the more prepared you will be.*

2. *Inviting and encouraging open-ended discussions will enhance the learning experience, increase the fun, and ensure comfort with Torah.*

Multi-unit note: *To ensure basic understanding of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs, there needs to be several lessons on each 'couple' and on the brothers. In order for there to be curiosity and intrigue about the stories, as we glean the relevancy for modern life, personal stories from the student's lives are elicited. This enhances Jewish identity and builds community, as the students get to know each other. The haggadic nature of this multi-unit lesson invites personal relationship to the text and to one's own life.*

Lesson One

Goal: *Introduce class to Torah study*

Overview: *Torah holds the master symbols, stories, and metaphors for the Jewish narrative through time. It is an unfolding map of how to become a righteous person, and is a continual revelation throughout time. What seems like stories of yester year can indeed be reframed through the stories of our own life.*

1. *Set up the space*
2. *Orientation to Torah: Give a simplified history and timing of how the Biblical stories fit in with our historical understanding of the world. Look at from a four-millennium perspective:*
 - a. *2000-1000 BCE - Age of Torah*
 - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - ~ 1950 - 1650 BCE*
 - Moses - ~ 1250 BCE*
 - b. *1000 BCE – 70 CE*
 - Age of First and Second Temple*
 - c. *0-1000 CE*
 - Middle Ages*



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d. 1000 – 2008 CE

Our modern history

3. Explore approaches to biblical text. Skills to learn:

Basic structure and content of Torah

Names of Five Books, how it is set up

How to find chapters and verses in the text

4. Explore text study tips in relationship to the first chapter of Genesis or story of your choice:

- *Begin with an understanding of the plain meaning of the text*
- *Summarize the story*
- *Ask: Who are the main characters? What is known about them?*
- *Determine the themes and key words of the text*
- *Ask: What information do you wish you had, to better understand the text?*
- *Ask: Is there anything in your own life the text reminds you of?*

5. Introduction to Bibliodrama

In order to do Bibliodrama, take a piece of text, preferably filled with dialogue, and present it to the class. There are several approaches you can take.

A. Have a student play each character in the text. Have them act out the dialogue or coach them in the situation that the characters face, and have the students create their own dialogue, staying true to the topic. Be sure to ask questions during the performance, to coax insight from them.

*B. Have the class read the text and ask a series of questions that illuminates the dilemmas and situations in the text. *Storah*TM uses questions such as*

"You have been given the foregoing text by Steven Spielberg. He has asked you to think about it cinematically. How many scenes can you find or imagine in this story? How might you construct each scene dramatically? He has asked you to think about supplementing the story outline with more dialogue, and even soliloquies. Where might you like more information?

He is giving you time to rehearse with the actors. You can use their skills as improvisers to create supplementary material and you have an opportunity to interview each character in role. What questions would you



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want to ask each character? Establish the sequence of characters to be heard from. Who would you want to hear from first? Second? Third? Last?

What would be your closing shot in this story?

C. Have the students create their own play or skit that reflects their understanding of the text.

Lesson Two: Abraham and Sarah

Goal: Student's develop a familiarity of the first Patriarch and Matriarch of the Jewish people, Abraham and Sarah.

Overview: Abraham lived a fully righteous life, even without the revelation at Sinai to guide him. He derived HaShem's will through the vigorous process of inner work. Indeed, this is a part of his greatness. Abraham is considered the progenitor of 55% of the world's religious population. What qualities did Abraham have that we can learn from?

Covers the following parshot: Lech Lecha, Vayera, Chayei Sarah, Genesis 18:1 – 24:9

Themes: Family, righteousness, relationship with the Divine

1. Procedures

Engaging the students includes creating an atmosphere for studying that is both conducive to learning and enticing to the imagination. Suggestions for each and every lesson

- Set up the space. Use things like tablecloths on tables, candles, and healthy snacks.
- Choose texts (see attached lessons). Learn to look up pesukim and then discuss the text and reflect upon its meanings.
- Study key stories and look for the moral lessons. Help the students deduce themes in the stories.
- Keep things in historical perspective, comparing and contrasting then and now.
- Talk about everyday life and our version of the tensions and conflicts. How do we deal with these things now?
- Discuss personal narrative in relationship to the text.
- Use a combination of lecture, discussion, bibliodrama (see Lesson One) and small group breakout sessions.



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2. **Introduce Abraham and Sarah:** see what the students already know about them
3. **Go through the text with the students to point out specific qualities of Abraham**
Use the references listed in the Appendix.
*Righteousness, Hospitality, Monotheism, Knowing the explicit will of HaShem
Faith, Holiness, Warrior, Visionary, Statesman and Diplomat, Priest, Visiting the Sick¹*
4. **Go through the Chumash, having the students look up as many of the qualities as possible.**
5. **Discuss these with the students; allow for an open-ended discussion that is both textually and personally relevant. Tangents will occur; allow for this, yet gently bring the students back to the text.**
6. **Look at a Sarah story or two. If there is time, try to bibliodrama the Sarah and Hagar story. (See Lesson One for bibliodrama ideas).**

Sarah: Genesis: 12:10-20; 16:1-6; 18:10-15; 21:1 - 3

Hagar and Ishmael

Sarai and Hagar fight, 16:1-16

Bibliodrama

Ishmael forced out, 21:9

Text study tips:

Be sure student understands the plain meaning of the text.

Summarize the story.

What are the themes and key words of the text you have read?

Who are the main characters? What do you know about them?

What information do you wish you had, to better understand the text?

Is there anything in your own life the text reminds you of?

Lesson Three Isaac and Rebecca

Goal: To familiarize students with the story of the Patriarch and Matriarch Isaac and Rebecca, and to introduce the story of their twin sons, Jacob and Esau.

Overview: Abraham urges his beloved servant, Eliezer to go to Abraham's old home in Haran, to find Isaac a wife. Eliezer brings Rebecca back to Canaan. Isaac and Rebecca meet, and after some time, produce twins. Jacob and Esau grow up, with very different natures, and Jacob gains the blessings of the firstborn and the birthright from

¹ Each quality has a biblical proof



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Esau, by questionable means. Jacob ends up fleeing to Haran, to escape the wrath of his brother.

Covers the following parshot: Chayei Sarah, Toledot, 23:1 – 28:29

Themes: Wells, family, strategy, manipulation and ethics

1. Procedures

Engaging the students includes creating an atmosphere for studying that is both conducive to learning and enticing to the imagination. Suggestions for each and every lesson

- *Set up the space. Use things like tablecloths on tables, candles, and healthy snacks.*
- *Use the chosen texts. Have students look up the pesukim (do not give page numbers) and then discuss the text and reflect upon its meanings.*
- *Study key stories and look for the moral lessons. Help the students deduce themes in the stories.*
- *Keep things in historical perspective, comparing and contrasting then and now.*
- *Talk about everyday life and our version of the tensions and conflicts. How do we deal with these things now?*
- *Discuss personal narrative in relationship to the text.*
- *Use a combination of lecture, discussion, bibliodrama (see Lesson One) and small group breakout sessions.*

2. Review: *How many books are there in the Torah, Abraham and Sarah's lineage*

3. Introduce Isaac and Rebecca and see what the students know about them.

4. Split group into three groups

Each group must summarize one of the stories below, and come up with one teaching point and two questions for class discussion.

Isaac and Rebecca 24:1 - 67

Jacob 'tricking' Esau out of the birthright Genesis 25:19 - 33

The Deception: Isaac and his sons Genesis 27:1 - 28:9

5. Discuss the above, each group summarizing, teaching, and asking the two questions.

6. Discuss what is the difference between strategy and manipulation, in the context of Jacob and Esau's story. Sample questions for discussion:



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Did Rivka do the right thing? Explore the following issues in relationship to this question. Can intention of what one wants to accomplish forgive the trickery? Does the means justify the ends? Which brother do you think would make the best Patriarch – Esau or Jacob? What are the qualities of each and which do you value? What do you think of the ancient tradition of the rights of the firstborn? What are the family dynamics in your family, between the oldest and youngest?

Proof Rivka knew who would carry the seed of the tribe of Israel: 25:23

For reference purposes:

strat·e·gy n

- 1. the science or art of planning and conducting a war or a military campaign*
- 2. a carefully devised plan of action to achieve a goal, or the art of developing or carrying out such a plan*
- 3. in evolutionary theory, a behavior, structure, or other adaptation that improves viability*

ma·nip·u·late vt

- 1. to operate, use, or handle something*
- 2. to control or influence somebody or something in an ingenious or devious way*
- 3. to change or present something in a way that is false but personally advantageous*

Laban, treachery, learning about transformation

7. If there's time, you can explore the theme of the well in Biblical stories

The well(s) – looking at how the water moves

Eliezer at the well

Rivkah at the well

Isaac re-digs the well

Digs 3 new wells

Rachel and Jacob at the well

Text study tips:

Be sure student understands the plain meaning of the text.

Summarize the story.

What are the themes and key words of the text you have read?

Who are the main characters? What do you know about them?



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*What information do you wish you had, to better understand the text?
Is there anything in your own life the text reminds you of?*

**Lesson Four Jacob, Leah, Rachel, 12 sons and a daughter, and the
Consorts**

Goal: To familiarize the students with Jacob's journey as a Patriarch, as well as his two wives, Matriarchs Leah and Rachel.

Overview: Jacob leaves Canaan and encounters a Godly place, falls in love, learns about life, love, treachery, transformation, and family relationships. After the birth of his first twelve children (the last child was born in Canaan), he leaves with his family, back to the land of Canaan. Upon reentering Canaan, he has another Godly encounter, and then meets his brother again, after twenty years. Jacob's transformation includes the exploration of deception and its reframe into a sacred understanding of God's will.

Text covered: Vayetze, Vayishlach, Vayeishev; Genesis 28:10 – 37:36

Themes: The sacred and the mundane, transformation, dysfunctional family relationships, love

1. Procedures

Engaging the students includes creating an atmosphere for studying that is both conducive to learning and enticing to the imagination. Suggestions for each and every lesson

- *Set up the space. Use things such as tablecloths on tables, candles, and healthy snacks.*
- *Choose texts (see attached lessons). Learn to look up pesukim and then discuss the text and reflect upon its meanings.*
- *Study key stories and look for the moral lessons. Help the students deduce themes in the stories.*
- *Keep things in historical perspective, comparing and contrasting then and now.*
- *Talk about everyday life and our version of the tensions and conflicts. How do we deal with these things now?*
- *Discuss personal narrative in relationship to the text.*
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Note to teacher: Be prepared to discuss the delicate issue of consorts. It is best to use a playful yet matter of fact way. Use symbolic language, as direct sexual references are difficult; yet do not deny the complexity of the relationships. Know your class and their emotional readiness for this topic.

2. Review

Genealogy of Patriarchs and Matriarchs, historical perspective of the culture contrasted with today's times, Family dynamics

3. Ask the students what they know about Jacob, Leah, Rachel and their sons

4. Briefly tell the overall story of Jacob, from his leaving Canaan to the selling of Joseph:

Jacob's journey in Haran (Gen 28:10 – 32:1)

Leaving Canaan - dream

Laban, treachery, learning about transformation

Family life in Haran: 2 wives, 2 concubines

Returning home and a new name (Gen 32:21 – 32:33)

The battle at the river

Receiving of the new name

Boundary crosser

One who struggles with God

Meeting Esau (Gen 33:1 – 16)

The selling of Joseph Gen 37:2 - 36

5. Split group into three groups

Each group must summarize one of the stories below, and come up with one teaching point and two questions for class discussion.

Jacob's ladder: Genesis 28:10 – 22

Meeting Rachel, love, Leah, and two weddings: Genesis 29:18 – 29:32

Crossing the River: Genesis 32:21 – 32:33

**6. Do Bibliodrama on the selling of Joseph (see Lesson One for further instructions)
Genesis 37:2 - 36**

Text study tips

1. Be sure you understand the plain meaning of the text.

2. Summarize the story.

2. What are the themes and key words of the text you have read?



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- 3. Who are the main characters? What do you know about them?*
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Appendix References for Lesson Two on Abraham and Sarah

Righteousness - Contrast Noah and Abraham

Genesis 6:9

Genesis 18:16-33

Hospitality

Genesis 18:1-15

Monotheism - Abraham as first recorded monotheist

Midrash Rabbah, Pg. 313 - Abraham asks: *Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide? These ponderings led to a relationship with God as personal revelation.*

Knowing the mitzvot: the explicit will of HaShem

Genesis 12:1-12:3; Lech Lecha: *Abraham's inner journey. Abraham's ability to glean the mitzvot without revelation.*

Faith

Midrashic stories – *the fiery furnace. Nimrod orders Abraham into a fiery furnace. After 3 days, he is still alive.*

Holiness

Genesis 17:1-5, 15. *The adding of the heh to names*

Warrior

Genesis 14:14 – 17

Visionary

Genesis 15:1-6

Statesman and Diplomat

Genesis 14:20 – 24

Priest

Genesis 15:10 – 18

Visiting the Sick/Bikkur Cholim

Genesis 18:2 *We learn about visiting the sick through Abraham, who was recovering from circumcision, and the angels came to visit him, because of his great merit. This visit generalizes to the entire Jewish people.*

Other parts of Abrahamic story: done through discussion, bibliodrama, or break-out groups

Egypt and famine

Genesis 12:10 - 20

Lot

Genesis 13:5 -11



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| <i>Kings and Wars</i> | <i>Genesis 14:7 - 20</i> |
| <i>Sodom and Gemorrah</i> | <i>Genesis 18:20 - 33</i> |
| <i>Avimelech</i> | <i>Genesis 20:1 - 18</i> |
| <i>Cave of Macpelah</i> | <i>Genesis 23:3 - 20</i> |