



Educator's Guide

The Jewish Origin Story

In this introductory video to the series “The Jewish Story Explained,” enter the biblical world of Avraham and his family to answer the question: “What does the Jewish people’s own story say about what makes a Jew?” Journey back several thousand years and follow the first “Ivri” as he transforms religion, culture and the human relationship to God. After watching the video, use the prompts below to learn more and get your students thinking.

Glossary:

Avraham - Abraham

Yitzchak - Isaac

Yacov - Jacob

Akeida - Binding

Avot - patriarchs

Imahot - matriarchs

Bracha - blessing

[Link to video](#)

Further Reading

1. Etzion, “[Parashat Toldot: Birthrights and Blessings](#)”
2. Sefaria, “[Avraham](#)”
3. Center for Israel Education, “[Biblical Covenants](#)”
4. Rabbi Sacks, “[Vayishlach Jacob Wrestling](#)”
5. Aleph Beta, “[Abraham Outcasts Hagar Story](#)”
6. [Overview of Avraham’s family tree](#)

Review – Did the students understand the material?

1. When is the first time that Avraham argues with God?
 - a. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah



- b. The binding of Yitzchak
 - c. The expulsion of Yishmael
- 2. What is a midrash?
 - a. Interpretation of the Torah
 - b. Director's cut of the Torah
 - c. Lesson from the Torah
 - d. **All of the above**
- 3. What are the two meanings of the word *ivri*?
 - a. **Originating from the other side of the river**
 - b. **Standing on the "other side," against societal norms or customs**
- 4. Why did Yacov decide to leave his uncle Lavan's house?
 - a. **His family had grown and he decided it was time to face Eisav and return to Eretz Yisrael**
- 5. How many years did Yacov have to work to marry his wives Leah and Rachel?
 - a. 12
 - b. 13
 - c. **14**
 - d. 15

Discussion Questions

1. The narrator points out that even though Avraham was so used to arguing with God when he disagreed, when it came to the *akeida*, the binding of Yitzchak, his son, he was silent. The following [excerpt](#) from Ethan Tucker's essay on the *akeida* presents R. David Hartman's complex and thoughtful questions regarding the dichotomy presented above. Read through his summary of the "paradox that is Avraham" and discuss the questions he asks:

These stories, seen side by side, present us with the paradox that is Abraham. The forefather of the great monotheistic traditions contained within him two incompatible realities: one of heroic self affirmation, and one of self denial. In one story, the protagonist maintains the ability to render an independent moral awareness, to know what he knows. He is an actor with full authority over his moral universe. In the other story, he is unable to recognize even his most primal paternal instinct. In one story, he acts; in the other, he simply obeys. The fact that two such dichotomous approaches are embodied by the very same person only highlights the polarity of these two narratives... The ultimate question for



me, then, is which story do we embrace? Which Abraham presents the truest picture of what it means to be a person and a Jew?...

2. A major controversy in the stories about the avot and imahot is the story of Yakov stealing Eisav's identity in order to acquire the *bracha* from his father. Talmud Tractate Bava Metzia 23b/24a records: **Rav Yehuda says that Shmuel says: With regard to these three matters alone, it is normal for Sages to amend their statements** and deviate from the truth: **With regard to a tractate**, if he is asked whether he studied a particular tractate, he may humbly say that he did not, even if he did. **And with regard to a bed**, if he is asked whether he slept in a particular bed, he may say that he did not, to avoid shame in case some unseemly residue is found on the bed. **And he can lie with regard to a host [ushpiza]**, as one may say that he was not well received by a certain host to prevent everyone from taking advantage of the host's hospitality. Think about the underlying value(s)/principle(s) of these particular allowances for "deviating from the truth." Does Yakov's deceit fit into any of these categories? If not, is it still possible to justify his actions? For a lengthier discussion of the value of truth in Judaism, see [this article from My Jewish Learning](#).
3. Later in Yakov's life, when he works for seven years to marry his precious Rachel, Lavan pulls a "switcheroo" and gives him Leah, her older sister, as a wife instead. There is something similar between this action and Yakov's earlier deception, and the text even uses similar language to draw this parallel. Do you think Yakov is getting his due punishment for an earlier transgression, or are Lavan's actions meant to teach Yakov a moral lesson about being victimized by deception?
4. One theme that runs through the stories of the patriarchs/matriarchs is name changes. (Avram becomes Avraham, Sarai becomes Sarah, Yakov becomes Yisrael.) What does your name mean to you?
5. Why are we called Bnei Yisrael (children of Israel) and not Bnei Yakov (children of Jacob)?

Learning Activities

1. Use this ready made [lesson plan](#) to teach about the Jewish Origin Story!



2. The story of the patriarchs/matriarchs is essentially the family story of the Jewish people. Have your students take a few minutes to write down as much of their family tree as they can. Then, have them choose one person who they think made a lasting impact on their family legacy and write about that person's contribution. Have them share with a partner or present to the class.

3. Read the following article about Avraham, either as a whole class or in small groups. Allow students to choose from the following activities, either as individuals or in small groups, to reflect on the material:
 - Write a series of journal entries from Avraham's perspective. Students should attempt to address Avraham's feelings, challenges, doubts, hopes, etc. about his new mission and his impact.
 - Write an article in a local Cana'anite newspaper (or social media outlet) about Avraham as a rising celebrity/influencer. [Note: you can also expand this assignment to address the importance/influence and endangerment of local newspapers!]

4. Have the students play "Four Corners" with the following prompts: [The rules of Four Corners: Put a sign in each of the four corners of the room, *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree*, *Strongly Disagree*, and have students walk over to the corner with their answer to each prompt. Ask students to share *why* they chose their answer. You can even encourage them to persuade others to move to their corner and give students the opportunity to move around as they hear other students' explanations.]
 - Avraham was the most influential person who ever lived
 - Sarah was justified in kicking Hagar and Yishmael out of her house
 - Avraham should have spoken up/argued when God asked him to sacrifice Yitzchak
 - Rivkah was a bad mother for encouraging/aiding Yaakov in deceiving Yitzchak and taking the *bracha* that should have gone to Esav
 - Yakov had the most difficult life of any of the *avot*
 - Yakov's wrestling match was a turning point in Jewish history
 - I am an *ivri* in the sense that I stand up for what I believe in, even when it is unpopular or countercultural

5. Gallery Walk: The video described some of the most important details of the lives of the *avot/imahot*, as well as some of their most impactful character traits. As



their descendants, we have inherited some of these traits, mostly for good (and maybe sometimes for not so good), and have to grapple with many of the same challenges that they did. In order to have the students reflect on these traits in themselves, post each of these five character archetypes around the room. Have students walk around and decide which one they relate to the most. Have them write a few sentences about why they chose their character. When they share their choices with the class, use this as an opportunity to reflect on the traits/actions/events that made the biggest impact on who we are as a people.

Avraham - The Iconoclast

Argues with God (Genesis 18:23-33)

Rejects idolatry, even though everyone else was engaging in it (Radak on Genesis 12:8)

Willing to redeem anyone (Genesis 12:5)

Willing to sacrifice everything for God (Genesis 22)

Sarah - The Protector

Helps Avraham spread his teachings (Genesis 12:5)

Offers her handmaiden so that he can have a son and continue his legacy (Genesis 16:1-4)

Demands that Avraham kick out his first son in order to protect her own son from bad influences (Genesis 21:9-11)

Yitzchak The Entrencher

Willing to be sacrificed for God (Genesis 22)

Key to maintaining Avraham's legacy (Genesis 21:12)

Re-digs Avraham's wells - follows in his father's footsteps (Genesis 26:18-33)

Stays in Eretz Yisrael - establishes a lasting connection to the Land (Genesis 26:1-3)

Rivkah - The Intervener

Understands the nature of her two sons even before they're born (Genesis 25:22-23)

Goes to great lengths to ensure the continuation of Avraham and Yitzchak's legacy (Genesis 24:67, see Rashi and Breshit Rabba; Rashbam on Genesis 27:46)

Helps Jacob disguise himself in order to obtain Esav's bracha from their father Isaac (Genesis 27:5-17)



Yacov - The Builder

Works for many years to marry Rachel (and Leah) (Genesis 29:16-30)

Has 12 sons (Genesis 29:32 onwards)

Wrestles with an angel (or robber) all night and then demands a bracha (Genesis 32:25-29)

Struggles with God, his brother, his uncle, himself (Genesis 32:29)

Reconciles with Esav (Genesis 32:6-12)

Carries on Avraham and Yitzchak's legacy (Genesis 35:9-15)

6. Give your students our [Kahoot](#) on the Jewish Origin Story!

Reflection Questions

1. If you were in a wrestling match with an angel or other representative figure, what or who would you be wrestling with?
2. Here is a quote from the video. "To be a child of Israel, you have to grow, wrestle with the big ideas, search for deeper meaning, perpetually arguing from the "other side." In what area of your life are you wrestling/searching/arguing?
3. Avraham is described as an *ivri*, someone who "stands on the other side." of social issues. Think about a time when you believed in something that differed from your peer group or even society. Did you take a stand for what you believed in? Why or why not?

Adaptations for Online Learning

1. Hook Activity:
 - Teacher can sign up for [Padlet](#) and create a board for students to post on
 - Students can create a drawing or write out their family tree and post it on the padlet so everyone can share
2. Review questions can be sent out as a [Go Formative](#) quiz so that the teacher can get feedback right away and address any misunderstandings when the video ends, before moving on to the activity.
3. Four Corners Activity:
 - Teacher can share screen and have a slide for each prompt, and students can either
 - i. Write their answer on a white board if they have one, or



- ii. Write out all four answers on separate sheets of paper and hold up their answer for each prompt
 - Teacher can still facilitate discussion between each prompt by “scanning the room” and asking students to elaborate on their answers
- 4.** Reflection questions can also be posted on a Padlet
- 5.** Kahoot can be played virtually
- 6.** Assessment question:
 - Teacher can use a Go Formative “quiz” as an exit ticket for students to complete before leaving the class