

Jewish History

The **BIG** Picture

ABRIDGED LEADER'S GUIDE

by Ellen J. Rank



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INTRODUCTION

This leader's guide is designed to be used in conjunction with *Jewish History: The Big Picture*, by Gila Gevirtz, for an adult education class in Jewish history.

Deborah E. Lipstadt asks in the foreword, “What will we do with the history we study?” As teachers, we want people to learn from the past, to understand how their actions are affected by their history, and to think about how they can help shape the future of Judaism, the Jewish community, and the world. The more we learn, the more we are able to ask our own questions, such as:

“What is history’s relevance to me?”

“How can history guide me in how to live my life and be a positive force in my community and the world?”

There are three main themes woven into *Jewish History: The Big Picture*—

- The **adaptability** of the Jewish people
- The **diversity** of the Jewish people
- The **centrality** of the land of Israel to the Jewish people

Most of the questions in this guide focus on these themes, to help us understand Judaism and the Jewish community throughout history.

Jewish History: The Big Picture is comprised of twenty-seven chapters organized into five main parts. This Abridged Leader’s Guide presents two different types of discussion questions:

- BIG Picture Questions—five overarching questions that relate to themes spanning the entire book
- Part Overview Questions—three or four discussion questions for each of the five parts of the book.

A full Leader’s Guide will soon be available in print version. In addition to these two types of questions, it will present overview material and discussion questions for each of the twenty-seven chapters in the book.

We hope that this guide will serve as a springboard for lively, informative, and reflective discussions.

BIG PICTURE QUESTIONS

These big picture questions relate to themes that run throughout *Jewish History: The Big Picture*, and can guide your discussions about the book as a whole.

1. **Identity:** How have the Jewish people kept their Jewish identity strong for more than two thousand years while living in diverse communities around the world? Looking forward, what kinds of choices and decisions will Jews need to make in the future, in order to preserve the vitality of Judaism and the Jewish community?
2. **Diversity:** What are some of the different beliefs and values that caused the Jewish people to branch out into diverse groups such as the Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox movements? What are the unifying values, beliefs, and ideals that are inherent to Judaism and shared by all practicing Jews? How might various Jewish groups bond together and see themselves truly as one nation?
3. **Social Justice:** How has the core Jewish value of social justice motivated Jews to work toward building a better world? What forces help make a person willing to take risks or make sacrifices for the sake of a greater or common good? How can we help motivate and prepare the next generation of Jews to actively pursue social justice?
4. **Israel:** What kinds of connections did Jews maintain with the land of Israel for the thousands of years that Israel was ruled by others? How was the Jewish community changed by the destruction of the Second Temple and by the establishment of the State of Israel? What can be done to help Diaspora Jews maintain a relationship with Israel, and how might this help to keep Judaism and the Jewish community strong?
5. **Demographics:** How and why has the demography of the Jewish people changed since World War II? What are the positive and negative effects of Judaism having changed from a truly worldwide religion to a religion centered in a few of the world's wealthiest and most advanced countries? How might these demographic changes affect the continued vitality of Judaism and the Jewish community?

PART ONE: ORIGINS AND EXILE

(Chapters 1-3, book pages 5-36)

Overview

Early Israelites kept Judaism alive under different types of rule: as a group of tribes; as a unified, self-governed people; as exiles from their homeland; and as subjects in their homeland to foreign rulers.

Discussion Questions

1. How did early Israelites adapt to living under different types of rule? What were some of the challenges they faced during this time? What are some challenges faced today by North American Jews who wish to maintain their Jewish identity? How might Jews today respond to these challenges?
2. What caused intolerance and lack of understanding among the Jews of ancient Israel? Describe some of the ramifications of the tensions and conflicts among the groups. What are some conflicts today among Jews? What are some examples of different groups of Jews coming together for a common cause? How might Jews today learn to show one another greater respect and tolerance?
3. In what ways was the Land of Israel central to the Jewish people, both those living in the Land of Israel and those living in the Diaspora, from the birth of the Jewish people to the time of the destruction of the Second Temple? What are some of the ways that Israel is important today to Jews worldwide?

PART TWO: DIASPORA AND DIVERSITY

(Chapters 4-9, book pages 37-100)

Overview

After the destruction of the Second Temple, Jews reinvented their religion and met new challenges in the lands of the Diaspora.

Discussion Questions

1. What factors caused the Jews of Ashkenaz and the Jews of Sepharad to develop their own unique customs and traditions? How was each group shaped by its surrounding cultural, political, and religious environments? Which core values and beliefs shared by these two groups can help the two communities today to respect and understand each other?
2. What were some of the greatest challenges faced by Jewish communities in the Middle Ages? How did the communities respond to these challenges in order to keep Judaism thriving and vital? What can we learn from these communities about how to respond to challenges that threaten freedom of religion?
3. How did the Jews manage to keep Judaism alive and vigorous despite the destruction of the Second Temple and the shift of Jewish population from the Land of Israel to the Diaspora? How has modern Judaism been shaped by these adaptations?
4. What factors contributed to the hostility, persecution, and mistrust between Christians and Jews during the Middle Ages? How can we work today to lessen these conflicts and to strengthen positive interfaith relations?

PART THREE: ENLIGHTENMENT AND EMANCIPATION

(Chapters 10-14, book pages 101-152)

Overview

Jewish communities increasingly began to integrate into the societies around them as emancipation spread. Jews strived to adapt Judaism to the modern world without losing their core Jewish values.

Discussion Questions

1. From the 1500s through the 1800s Jews experienced segregation, integration, emancipation, and antisemitism. How were each of these—even emancipation, which should have been solely a positive force—a threat to the vitality of Judaism? How did the Jewish people adapt to each of these experiences as they maintained their core Jewish values? How do these adaptations continue to influence Judaism today?
2. How did the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, lead the way toward greater diversity in Jewish thought and practice? What shaped Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox, and ultra-Orthodox Judaism? How do these movements differ from one another? What core values do they share?
3. Why did Reform Jews in the 1800s break off their connection to the Land of Israel? How did the Reform position reflect the view that Jews are not a separate people or nation but only adherents of the Jewish religion? Why do you think that despite centuries of living in the Diaspora, Jews continued to hope for an independent state in their ancestral homeland?

PART FOUR: ANTISEMITISM AND ZIONISM

(Chapters 15-21, pages 153-214)

Overview

The rise of antisemitism made it difficult for Jews to adapt to their surrounding cultures and also contributed to dreams of a Jewish state.

Discussion Questions

1. How did the face of world Jewry change from the 1880s to the 1930s? What motivated some Jews to move to the Land of Israel or North America, while others chose to remain in Western or Eastern Europe? How and why did Judaism evolve into four different movements in North America? How do the changes during this period impact on Jews today?
2. What social and political factors set the stage for Zionism? Describe some of the beliefs regarding what the Jewish state should be like. Which of these early visions of a Jewish state are evidenced in the modern State of Israel?
3. How did the Jewish value of *tikun olam*, social justice, influence Jews to work to improve the societies in which they lived? What were some of the ways Jews adapted to European and American cultures? How did the rise of antisemitism make it difficult for Jews to adapt to their surrounding cultures? How do North American Jews today balance Jewish identity with secular identity?

PART FIVE: DEVASTATION AND REBIRTH

(Chapters 22-27, book pages 215-275)

Overview

The Holocaust brought devastation on a scale never before imagined. In the aftermath, the Zionist dream of a Jewish state finally became reality, but not without significant new challenges.

Discussion Questions

1. Why has the Jewish population shifted from being spread across six continents to being largely located in North America and Israel? How have Jews adapted to new living situations after emigrating from their homelands? What have been some of the greatest challenges and how have they been met? Based on these demographic changes, what challenges do you foresee in the future and how can they be addressed?
2. How have both America and Israel developed a great diversity in their Jewish populations? What are some of the different groups that comprise the American Jewish community and Israeli society? What core values and beliefs are shared by all these groups?
3. What role has Israel played for the worldwide Jewish community since the end of World War II? How do events in Israel affect Diaspora Jews? Why is it important that Jews around the world maintain a close relationship with Israel and Israeli Jews? What can be done to foster positive relations between Diaspora Jews and Israel?