



The Art of Letters

Topic

Hebrew, Art

Grade Level(s)

2nd grade and up - Some knowledge of Hebrew letters required

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will

- Learn how artists use Hebrew letters and words for personal interpretation
- Create a visual interpretation of a Hebrew letter / word / phrase

Materials needed

- Art reproductions for reference (Three are included at the end of the lesson.)
- Water color paper (or heavyweight paper)
- Pencils, erasers
- Rulers
- Fine tip markers / colored pencils / watercolor and brush
- *The Alphabet of Creation* by Ben Shahn (optional)
- *Your Jewish Lexicon* by Edith Samuel (optional)
- Recording of "The Alef Bet Song" by Debbie Friedman (optional)

Technology needed

- Tayasui Sketches (optional) free for iOS and Android (tayasui.com/sketches/)
- Autodesk SketchBook (optional) free for all major platforms (sketchbook.com/)

Background for Teachers

- Artistic background – Designs with Hebrew Letters

Throughout the ages, Hebrew letters have been used as design elements. They have been incorporated into geometric patterns with repetitive lines and they have been used to represent elements from nature like stylized plants and leaves.

Such designs can be found in calligraphy writing and illuminations of religious manuscripts; on functional objects made out of ceramics, textile and metal; and even in architecture and in wall decorations.



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Some people posit that the popularity of using letters and words as the basis for artistic representation comes from the biblical prohibition of making graven images (Exodus 20:4), which some say includes any human representation in art.

While several examples of stylized letter artwork are included with this lesson, consider taking an indoor fieldtrip around your building to search for different works of art that contain Hebrew writing.

- *The Alphabet of Creation - a Kabbalistic Legend*

Many traditional sources state that letters and words have a special power. After all, the entire world was created with God's words (Genesis 1:1-28). A legend that appears in the Zohar (2b-3a), the foundational work of Kabbalah, tells a story about the time of creation. In this legend, the 22 letters of the Alef Bet came down from God's crown, where they were engraved with fire, and stood before God, and each letter argued why creation should start with it.

- Hebrew Alphabet Bibliography (available as download)

This collection of books curated by JTeach.org enables students and teachers to explore different aspects of the Alef Bet, ranging from artistic representations to yoga to mystical meanings. Take the opportunity to gather some (or all) of these books and leave them around the classroom for people to explore.

Description of Activities*

1. Introduce the lesson by showing visual examples of stylizing letters in Jewish art.
 - a) Discuss:
 - What do you see in the picture?
 - How does the artist use Hebrew letters and/or words?
 - What do you think the artist is trying to convey?
 - How does the artist convey ideas by using letters and art together?
 - b) Consider taking a tour around your building to find Hebrew writing. Compare and contrast how Hebrew writing is used in the art examples to how Hebrew writing is used in the examples around the building.
2. Teach about stylizing letters in Jewish art. See the Background for Teachers for additional information.

*If students need to review the Alef Bet before starting this activity, sing "The Alef Bet Song" by Debbie Friedman or use a different method that is appropriate for your class.



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3. Ask students to create their own Hebrew-letter artwork.
 - a. Choose a Hebrew letter, a word, or a phrase that is meaningful to you such as your name, or a Jewish value. It can be a word or phrase that connects to a holiday, Bible story, or other topic that you are currently learning.
 - b. Use a pencil to write your chosen word in large bubble letters.
 - c. Incorporate into the design Jewish visual symbols and related personal images such as *Magen David*, peace sign, dove, menorah and more.
 - d. Add lines to create a pattern. Color with markers, pencils and/or watercolor.
 - e. Name your work and write a two-sentence description of its idea.
 - f. Exhibit the artworks and their descriptions in school. Include a written explanation about the content and the work process.

Additional Activities:

- Turn students' designs into fun personalized items: Create placemats by laminating the works; scan and print the designs to create an 11" x 17" wrapping paper; collage with Mod Podge on a picture frame.
- Technology Option: Instead of using paper and markers, use one of the sketching apps to create a digital image.

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Ask students to base their design on one or two letters only.
- Write down students' chosen words for them, so they can create their designs.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Students read *The Alphabet of Creation*. What other words can they think of that would promote the cases of each letter to begin the creation of the world? Students can use *Your Jewish Lexicon* by Edith Samuel to help them come up with words. Ask students to consider the holiness of words and how words and letters can change the world.

The Art of Letters



A pattern made out of Hebrew and Latin letters engraved in glass panels, spelling the word “Poland”.

Polin Museum, Warsaw, Poland 2013

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Board of Jewish Education of Metropolitan Chicago’s Online Resource Center

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Mocatta Hagaddah Early 14th century, Spain. Moorish-style crescent and star combined with a hexagram.

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A Welcome sign in Hebrew. Lilach Schrag

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