



Using Satire, Humor and Cartooning as Tools for Exploring World Events

Topic

Using Cartoons to Examine Tragedy

Grade Level

8th –12th

Goals

- Students will explore social commentary and satire as Jewish tools for coping with difficult situations.
- Students will learn to "read" or interpret cartoons and jokes to uncover the tools authors/illustrators use to explain or work through difficult events.
- Students will create cartoons in response to tragic or stressful events.

Prepare in Advance

- Familiarize yourself with the biblical stories of Jonah, and Balak and Balaam. Choose one story to read with your students to explore the ideas of satire and social commentary.
- Choose one or two jokes from the Jewish Humor sheet to share with the class to explore the idea of irony.
- Choose and print one to three of the editorial cartoons provided in the links in the "description of activities" section of this guide.
- Print the cartoons of Lincoln and the Twin Towers represented as pencils found in links in the same section.

Background for the Teacher

Balaam and Jonah

Both Balaam and Jonah are asked to be messengers. Balaam is asked by Balak to curse the Jews. He goes on this mission knowing that he will be unsuccessful. His interaction with an ass along the way underscores the futility of his mission; he is stopped in his tracks by an animal who seems smarter than him. In the end, his mission fails and instead of cursing the Jewish people he praises them with the words of *Mah Tov*: "How lovely are your tents O Jacob." Jonah is tasked with rebuking the people of Niniveh. Unwilling to speak on God's behalf, he runs away and is swallowed by a large fish with a large mouth. Near the end of the book of Jonah, a large plant grows over Jonah, giving him shade on a very hot day. When it withers, he is bereft. The irony that he cares for the plant more than he cares for the human beings who inhabit Niniveh is made very clear by the author.



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Editorial Cartoons

Lincoln

Bill Mauldin was a Pulitzer Prize winning editorial cartoonist. He served in the infantry during WWII and gained wide acclaim as a cartoonist for *Stars and Stripes*, depicting the grueling lives of everyday soldiers. After the war he worked for both the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* and the *Chicago Sun Times*. It was the latter that published among his most famous works, a likeness of the Lincoln Memorial, with president Lincoln holding his head in his hands. This appeared in the newspaper in 1963, after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

Charlie Hebdo

On January 7, 2015, two brothers claiming ties to Al Qaeda forced their way into the Paris offices of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, killing 12 and injuring another 11. In the days following the attack, more than 2 million people, including forty world leaders, gathered for solidarity events in Paris. The magazine is known for its anti-religion bias and has printed articles and cartoons deriding many of the major religions of the world.

Note: Some of the images cited contain strong content that might be difficult for some viewers. Remember to preview sites and use images that are appropriate for your class.

Description of Activities

Satire and Social Commentary in the Bible

- Read excerpts from the story of Balak and Balaam found in Chapter 22 of the Book of Numbers, focusing on the portions where Balaam is challenged by an ass, or the Book of Jonah, focusing on the portion where Jonah is swallowed by a large fish, and complains that a plant that has given him shade has withered.
- Introduce the concept of satire defined at www.merriamwebster.com, as follows: a way of using humor to show that someone or something is foolish, weak, bad, etc.: humor that shows the weaknesses or bad qualities of a person, government, society, etc.
- Ask students to give examples of satire or social commentary from the biblical story you shared.



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Jewish Humor

- Introduce the concept of irony, defined at www.merriamwebster.com as follows: a situation that is strange or funny because things happen in a way that seems to be the opposite of what you expected.
- Tell one or more of the jokes on the Jewish Humor page to students. Ask them to explain why how each of the jokes uses irony to produce a humorous effect.

Editorial Cartoons

1. Choose and print a few of the cartoons listed below.

Many religions together:

<http://www.intoon.com/cartoons.cfm/id/3233>

Mike Keefe, January 2003 It's a God Eat God World

Cartoon from around New Year's 2003 showing all the world religions fighting

<http://leftycartoons.com/2008/10/09/with-god-on-their-side-my-god/>

With God on Their Side -October 2008 Ampersand by B. Deutsch

A number of panels each depicting someone whose God suggested they do something – the last panel depicts someone saying, My God suggests I hide until all of their Gods go away.

<http://www.gocomics.com/signewilkinson/2006/02/08>

Big fat book of Offensive Religious Cartoons – depicts people of faith from many religions laughing at jokes together

Misunderstanding or misuse of religion

http://www.syracuse.com/opinion/index.ssf/2015/09/editorial_cartoons_of_the_week_god_n_bacon_mckinley_vs_denali.html

Drew Sheneman, June 2015

When it's about gay marriage, people quote religion, when it's about bacon, everyone's an atheist.



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Terrorism

<http://www.gocomics.com/stevebreen/2015/02/25>

Comparing Isis and Christians to Nazis and Jews

<http://www.gocomics.com/glenmccoy/2006/09/19>

“Ours is a peaceful religion and we'll kill anyone who says otherwise.”

2. Instruct the students to analyze the cartoons using the criteria and steps from the sheet entitled Analyzing Political Cartoons.
3. Now that the students have had some practice in analyzing cartoons, show them one or more of the following:

Lincoln with his Head in his Hands:

https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mauldin_Lincoln_cartoon.jpg

Reactions to Charlie Hebdo. The following link sends you to a number of cartoons compiled by the Daily Mail in the United Kingdom. We suggest using one of the many that depicts pencils:

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2901459/jesuisCharlie-world-s-cartoonists-react-Paris-massacre-poignant-drawings.html>

4. Look at these cartoons together as a class. Ask students if they feel the cartoonists employed similar or different tactics in reacting to a specific tragedy.
5. Ask students to work in small groups to write and illustrate a cartoon of their own in reaction to a recent tragedy of your or their choosing. Have them show their work and explain their choices to the class.

Student Generated Cartoons

Creating comic strips is a fun and educational way to engage students. They can retell historical incidents as well as provide analysis of events that took place. Students can include their own commentaries and offer advice through their storyboards. Most apps offer a wide range of tools which may be used to show emotions and reactions, making it an excellent vehicle for students to process their feelings in a creative way.

To select apps that will work best with the technology devices available in your setting, please consult the *Guide to Choosing Comic Creation Apps (download)*.



A Few Classic Jewish Jokes that have Been Handed Down Through the Ages

Shiva

An elderly man lay dying in his bed. As he lay there, he smelled the aroma of his favorite rugelach coming from the kitchen. He gathered his strength, and slowly lifted himself from the bed. Leaning against the wall, he made his way down the hall, and with even greater effort, gripping the railing tightly, he crawled downstairs. Exhausted, leaning on the wall for support, he looked into the kitchen. There, spread out upon waxed paper on the kitchen table were literally hundreds of cinnamon rugelach.

Mustering all of his strength, he half-limped, half-dragged himself to the table. He could almost taste the rugelach in his mouth; what a wonderful taste it was, like heaven itself. As he reached out his trembling hand, for one final taste of his favorite cookie, his wife lit out at him with her spatula, "Don't touch," she said, "they're for the shiva."

Church

A number of years ago, a traveling salesman, we'll call him Itzik, found himself far away from home and in need of a minyan to say Kaddish. Seeing no synagogue in sight, Itzik went into church, thinking it better to pray in the company of religious men than to pray alone.

He went inside, took a seat in the back row, took out his siddur (prayer book) his *tallit* and *tefillin*, and began to pray. Not used to seeing any "foreigners" and quite uncomfortable with the idea, the church was quickly abuzz with whispers about the man in the back row. The whispers reached the pastor who quickly asked all non-Christians to leave. Itzik continued his prayers.

Somewhat taken aback, but trying to preserve the decorum of the prayer service, the pastor asked once again, "Will all non-Christians please leave." But Itzik kept praying.

Finally, the pastor was given no choice but to address Itzik directly. He walked over to the pew where he was sitting, looked him straight in the eye and said, "Will all the Jews please leave."

Hearing this, Itzik took off his *tallit* and *tefillin*, picked up his prayer book, walked up to the altar and grabbed a statue of Jesus. Turning to leave he said, "C'mon, neither of us are welcome here."



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Yom Kippur

It was a very warm Yom Kippur in synagogue in the Hollywood Hills where the clergy was known for their flair for the dramatic. Late in the afternoon, the rabbi felt the energy in the room was quite low. Making the most of the moment, he dropped to his knees in front of the ark and said, "Oh God, before you I am nothing." The cantor, who felt that the rabbi was always trying to steal the limelight, and not wanting to be outdone, not only fell to his knees, but also put his forehead to the ground, and said, "Oh God, before you I am nothing."

Watching this from his seat in the congregation, Sol Goldstein was so moved, that he got up from his seat, walked to the aisle, lay down on the floor, and said, "Oh God, before you I am nothing." Seeing this, the cantor leaned over to the rabbi and with a smirk, whispered, "Look who thinks he's nothing!"