



Wonder in the Jewish Classroom

The R.J Palacio young-adult novel, *Wonder*, which made its debut in 2011, is set to be released as a major motion picture in November of 2017. It tells the story of August (Auggie) Pullman, a young boy with many facial deformities who, as a rising 5th grader, has already endured 27 corrective surgeries. Still, Auggie looks far from “normal” and wears a space helmet when out in public to avoid stares and ridicule.

As a result of his condition, his parents have chosen to home-school Auggie. *Wonder* tells the story of his fifth-grade year, both from his perspective and the perspective of other students and members of his family. It is a story of kindness, friendship and overcoming obstacles.

Wonder has many themes which will resonate in the Jewish classroom, among them welcoming strangers and being created in the image of God. Below, you will find a few suggestions for looking at the movie's themes through a Jewish lens, as well as some relevant Jewish texts to help you do so.

1. In the book and movie, Mr. Browne, the fifth-grade teacher, writes a precept on the board for each of the ten months of the school year. Ask your students to choose precepts for your classroom. Options:
 - Pass out selections from *Pirkei Avot* or *Mishlei* (Proverbs), and ask students to choose a precept from among them.
 - Visit your synagogue library and have students find precepts which speak to them in the *Tanakh*, *siddur*, *machzor*, volumes of Hebrew poetry or collections of Jewish quotations.
 - You might have students illustrate or illuminate their precepts and hang them around your classroom or synagogue.
2. Teach the story of Rabbi Elazar and the Ugly Man. (Babylonian Talmud *Ta'anit* 20a-b, available in the *Jewish Texts for Wonder Lesson* download) and compare it to Auggie's interactions with the people who make fun of him. Ask students why they think the rabbis of the Talmud thought it was important to relate this story.
3. Teach students the blessing for seeing unusual creatures. Ask why they think a blessing such as this exists. Ask under what circumstances they might say this blessing.
4. Read the story of the creation of human beings in the book of *Beresheet* (Genesis), focusing on the words *b'tzelem Elohim*. Ask students what being created in the image of God means.
5. Study texts about students and teachers from *Pirkei Avot* (available in the *Jewish Texts for Wonder Lesson* download).



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6. We have created a resource which pairs Mr. Browne's precepts with Jewish texts. Options:
 - Split into *chevruta* and give each team one or two precepts. Have them compare the Jewish text to the Wonder texts. Report out.
 - Cut the Mr. Browne's Precepts/Jewish Texts into 20 pieces – ten Jewish texts and ten precepts – and hand them out to students, making sure that no one gets the match to their own text. Give students five minutes to walk around the room trying to find their match. After all matches have been made, ask students to explain their choices.
 - Post either Mr. Browne's precepts or the Jewish texts on individual pieces of paper around the room. Have students work as a team to make matches with the set you haven't posted.
7. Teach the Jewish value of *hachnasat orchim*, welcoming guests. Ask students to reflect on their own experience: Have they ever been the stranger in a classroom that was new to them? Have they ever been in a classroom where a new student came mid-year or after many years of the same students being together. How did it feel? What was done well? What might have been done better? Strategize how you might best welcome a new student.
8. Jewish tradition includes a number of stories about someone who looked different (mainly poor or disheveled) and, as a result, was treated badly. In each instance, the offender acts differently when the stranger's true identity is revealed. Read one of these stories. Here are a few references to get started (preview the stories to determine their suitability for your students). Ask students how they might have reacted in similar circumstances. Ask how this differs from the way that Auggie reacted.

"The Bear in the Forest" in *The Mysterious Visitor: Stories of the Prophet Elijah* (p. 63), by Nina Jaffe (Scholastic, 1997)

When a couple fails to properly welcome a beggar into their home, their infant son is cursed to turn into a bear. The love and trust of a young woman allows him to become fully human again.

"Meeting Elijah" in *Journeys with Elijah: Eight Tales of the Prophet* (p. 67), retold by Barbara Diamond Goldin (Gulliver Books, 1999)

A rabbi recounts to his students how, in his youth, he did not recognize the prophet Elijah as he turned away a poor peddler in need of a warm place to spend the night. "I have not seen the prophet since that time. But now I greet each person I meet with a full heart no matter how he or she looks or who he or she is."

"The Woman with the Face of a Donkey" in *The Mysterious Visitor: Stories of the Prophet Elijah* (p. 51), by Nina Jaffe (Scholastic, 1997)

Discovering that his wife has the head of a donkey, a husband runs away, abandoning his wife and unborn son. Years later, with the prophet Elijah's assistance, the boy manages to reconcile his parents.
9. If you don't have time for a deep text study or lesson on Jewish values, we have included a few brief texts that you might refer to should the movie come up in conversation.