

Reel Learning



PIGEON

Educator's
Resource
Guide

AVODAarts



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AVODAarts

Tapping into the multiple ways that people learn and communicate, Avoda Arts uses film, music, photography, visual art and theatre as powerful entry points into Jewish learning. Visit us at www.AvodaArts.org to learn more about the **Reel Learning** educational film series.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	5
About the Film	5
About this Resource Guide	5
Using Film in the Classroom	7
Communicating Context.....	7
Building Literacy.....	8
Responding Critically	8
Appreciating Art.....	9
Tips for Active Viewing.....	9
Historical Background	11
France during World War II.....	11
The Setting of <i>Pigeon</i>	11
Discussion Questions	13
Basic Narrative.....	13
Symbolism.....	14
Film Techniques	14
Extension Activities	17
History.....	17
Rescue and Resistance	17
Mapping the History	18
Assignment, Rescue: The Story of Varian Fry	19
Media Literacy.....	20
Storyboarding.....	20
Director’s Techniques.....	21
The Medium of Film	22
Symbolism in <i>Pigeon</i>	23
Making Connections	24
The Case of Japanese North Americans in WWII.....	24
The Case of Spanish <i>Conversos</i>	24
Violence and Race.....	25
Tensions in Contemporary France	25
Jewish Values	26
Saving a Life	26
The Stranger Among You	28
Repairing the World	29
Resources	30
Timeline	30
Glossary of Terms	32
An Interview with Filmmaker Anthony Green.....	34
Related Books and Media	38
History – General Holocaust Resources	38
History – Rescue and Resistance	38
History – Holocaust in France	39
Film/Media Studies	39
Jewish Values	39

Introduction

ABOUT THE FILM

Remies, France. 1941. An unexpected act of kindness and courage in a time of cruelty and fear. A stark reminder of the human capacity for good. Anthony Green's short film *Pigeon* runs barely 11 minutes, but its thought-provoking impact remains long after the credits have faded.

Based on a true story, the film opens with a Jewish man waiting nervously for the train to Grenoble, in France's unoccupied zone. As he checks his forged papers, we sense that this may be his only chance for escape. The man watches as two young boys taunt a small bird on the station platform. He intervenes for the bird's sake and confiscates the boys' slingshot. But in the melee, his passport is stolen. Only after he's boarded the train does he realize his predicament. It's then that something amazing happens. Echoing his earlier kindness, a stranger intervenes on his behalf — risking her own life to save his.

Toronto-based filmmaker Anthony Green wrote and directed *Pigeon* while still a student at New York University's Maurice Kanbar Institute of Film and Television. Produced by Karen Wookey, it stars Oscar nominee Michael Lerner and Canadian screen legend Wendy Crewson.

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE GUIDE

Filled with rich symbolism, *Pigeon* stimulates thought and discussion about the choices we all make and about our motivations for making them. The film also serves as a catalyst for further explorations in the areas of Holocaust studies, film studies, and values education. On the following pages, you'll find resources and materials to help you use the film most effectively with your students.

The goals of this resource guide are to provide you, the educator, with the following:

- A general framework for using the medium of film effectively in your classroom
- Background and historical context for the film *Pigeon*
- Class discussion ideas related to the film's content and presentation
- Suggestions for connecting the film with broader explorations in history, media studies, and Jewish values
- Additional resources related to these topics

This guide is not meant to be an exhaustive curriculum, but rather a flexible tool for connecting the film with your class's ongoing studies. We encourage you to use those pieces that are most appropriate for your goals and most relevant to the needs of your students.

Using Film in the Classroom

Why use this film, or any film, in your teaching? Here are some thoughts to help place the medium of film in an educational context.

WRITTEN TEXTS — novels, textbooks, articles, memoirs — are common fare in our classrooms. We use these texts to teach content, build literacy and critical thinking skills, and instill an appreciation for the literary arts. The written word is an invaluable educational resource and its usefulness cannot be overstated. But our educational efforts are enhanced when we broaden our definition of “text” to include other, non-written documents.

FILM — the moving image — is one form of text whose potential is often underutilized. Much like written texts, media texts can communicate content, build literacy, elicit critical response, and inspire an appreciation for the arts.

COMMUNICATING CONTENT

Moving pictures are powerful communicators. Much of what our students know about their world, they’ve learned from television, film, and other audio-visual texts. By incorporating film into our educational process, we can tap into the power of moving images to communicate content — whether it’s information about life in a specific place or time, background about the experiences of a particular individual, or a new perspective on current social issues.

A film can function as an introduction to a unit of study — inspiring emotion and raising provocative questions while grounding students in a historical moment. Or it can serve as a conclusion — offering one author’s take on a subject that students have already become immersed in. Within a unit, films can serve as stimuli to further discussion and research, and offer opportunities to make connections across curriculum areas. Films also have the capacity to reach students — especially visual learners — who may have difficulty accessing other types of texts. A variety of media offers a variety of avenues for students to connect with the content they need to learn.

As the teacher, you should make sure to preview the film yourself before screening it to the class. This will enable you to determine the film’s appropriateness for your students and help you plan how best to use the film in the context of your ongoing curriculum. It will also give you a chance to prepare for any challenging questions that may arise.

BUILDING LITERACY

A writer chooses every word carefully, and constructs each sentence, paragraph, and chapter to communicate a specific message. Similarly, a filmmaker uses a very particular language — a visual language constructed through camerawork, **editing**, and sound design — to communicate with an audience. And if film is a language, we need to help students develop the skills to “read” it.

- What is the filmmaker’s point of view, and how does he or she express it?
- How does the choice of **framing**, pace, music, or color affect the narrative?

The ability to read a film can have far-reaching implications. Students who are media literate are able to engage more competently and critically in their environment. Media is too important and pervasive an element of our society for students not to be skilled in deconstructing its messages.

In addition, media literacy skills can be applied to other types of literacy. Active interpretation of film, like written texts, requires an understanding of character, theme, plot, and symbolism. A student who learns to predict, infer, ask questions, and make connections in film brings those same skills to the interpretation of written texts.

RESPONDING CRITICALLY

Through film, we can also help students develop stronger critical thinking skills — but only if we encourage them to respond critically to the film experience. Critical response means moving beyond, “I liked it.”

- Why did you like it?
- What elements of the film were effective?
- Which of the filmmaker’s techniques worked for you?
- Which didn’t? Why?
- What makes a film great?

It is important to encourage students to defend their opinions and cite examples to support their ideas. For example, it’s not enough to say the movie was boring.

- Were there particular parts of the film that dragged? Why were these parts boring?
- Was the topic uninteresting to you, or was it the filmmaker’s technique?
- Might a change of music or a different voice have improved things?
- Were there questions you wished the film had answered?
- Were there parts of the film that did work for you?
- What was better about those?

Note: All glossary terms are printed in **bold** the first time they appear in the text.

Historical Background

FRANCE DURING WORLD WAR II

Pigeon takes place in France, in 1941. Prior to World War II, France's sizeable Jewish population was largely assimilated into French society. Some even held high positions in government, finance, and the entertainment industry. At the same time, however, there were strong currents of anti-Semitism among the French population.

Historically, France had been a safe haven for immigrants, including Jews fleeing persecution and pogroms in Eastern Europe in the 1800s. The country repeatedly opened its doors again after World War I, Hitler's rise to power in Germany, the adoption of the **Nuremberg Laws**, and the **Anchluss**. By the time the film takes place, there was an ever-growing population of immigrants, and the French state began to make a distinction between long-established French citizens and the newcomers. France's poor pre-war economy and increasingly shaky immigrant relations led to anti-immigrant feeling and incursions on the rights of Jewish immigrants.

World War II began as a result of unprovoked German aggression directed at Poland in September of 1939. By June 14, 1940, the German army had occupied Paris and defeated the French, splitting the country between the German-occupied North and non-occupied South. An interim French government headed by Marshal Pétain was established at **Vichy** in the southern zone. Pétain and the Vichy government blamed foreign nationals, particularly Jewish immigrants, for France's defeat. Hundreds of foreign Jews were expelled from the free zone, with hundreds more interned in camps.

THE SETTING OF *PIGEON*

The film's main character was traveling from Remies to Grenoble. Remies, just outside of Paris, was the headquarters of the German operation in 1940s occupied France. As a Jew, the main character would have been subject to the numerous anti-Jewish regulations passed by the Germans in occupied France. Jews were divested of property and their businesses were in effect stolen and given to non-Jews. Unemployment skyrocketed, and it became nearly impossible for Jewish families to afford the barest essentials.

Grenoble was close to the Italian and Swiss borders, placing it well inside the free zone. However, the regulations of the new French regime at Vichy were little better than on the German side, and Grenoble's proximity to the border might have allowed the protagonist of the film to escape France — or even Europe altogether. By 1941, when the film takes place, a Jew in Vichy France could not hold government office or any other prominent public position, could not own property or operate a business, and could not participate in doctors' and lawyers' guilds. The citizenship of significant segments of the population was repealed altogether, including the sizable group of Algerian Jews who had been considered citizens for 75 years.

By 1941, Jews were not allowed to cross the border between occupied and non-occupied France. To ensure this, all persons in the occupied territories were issued special identification cards (the "papers" the SS guard in the film calls for on the train). The papers of a Jewish individual were marked with a bright red stamp that said *Juif*, French for Jew. In order to cross the heavily guarded border safely and travel undisturbed through the free zone, the main character had to have proof that he was not Jewish.

Discussion Questions

After showing the film, engage your class in a discussion of the basic narrative, symbolism, and filmmaking techniques used. You can ask students some of the questions below. Weave in any information about the film or about the historical period that may help students make sense of the film.

BASIC NARRATIVE

- When does this story take place? What clues in the film support this conclusion? What do you know about this period of time?
- What do you think is the main character's story?
- Why do you think the main character is leaving? Why is he traveling alone to Grenoble? Why do you think he has only one suitcase? Why would he buy a one-way ticket?
- What clues does the filmmaker include to show that the main character is leaving illegally? How does he show his apprehension?

(For example, he checks the time frequently, moves awkwardly, has trouble putting his bag away, etc.)

- What clues about the characters can we glean from their demeanor, mannerisms, and dress?

(For instance, the man has a gold pocket-watch, which suggests he is (or was) well-off; the woman is well-dressed and literate. The man is presented as a good person who feeds and protects a helpless pigeon.)

- Do you think the woman was Jewish? Why or why not?

(According to the filmmaker, she is not Jewish, but students may be able to argue either way.)

- Why do you think the woman helped the man? What do you think motivated her? How much time did she have to make her decision to assist the stranger? What were the potential short-term or long-term consequences of her decision?
- Do you think it was dangerous for the man to make a commotion with the boys and the pigeon, on the day of his escape? Why do you think he didn't just ignore them?
- Why do you think the guards believed the woman?
- Why do you think the characters remained silent after the guards left?
- Why do you think the filmmaker made this film? What do you think he wants people to take away from it?

Please feel free to adapt the suggested questions and activities as you see fit.

Extension Activities

HISTORY

Rescue and Resistance

At the time the film takes place, there was not yet any serious organized resistance to either German tactics or Vichy legislation in France. The repression of Jews was systematic and gradual. People placed their hope and allegiance in the French government, and many believed that they would not be targeted — up until the moment the police knocked on their door. Given that there was not yet an atmosphere of resistance in France in 1941, it is striking that the woman in the film made the dangerous choice to help the main character.

Once large numbers of people were being sent from Paris to Auschwitz and the fate of the Jews in France became vividly clear, a resistance movement did emerge. For example, French Communist Jews subverted the German authorities with the Yiddish underground newspaper *Unter Vort* ('Our Word'), Catholic clergy spoke out against the occupation of France, and some neighbors and friends of Jewish families hid people in their homes or helped them out of the country. However, resistance was not the norm, and the majority of French citizens did not save Jews during the Holocaust.

This was generally the case throughout Europe. There are examples of rescue in every country occupied by the Nazis, but it was risky and relatively rare. In many cases, rescuers acted on their own, hiding neighbors in their barns or attics. Others were part of organized efforts, such as the Polish underground organization ZEGOTA that helped hide several thousand Jewish children during the war. In a few places — including Denmark and Bulgaria — rescue happened on a national scale.

Among the Jews of Europe, there were numerous instances of organized resistance, as well. Despite overwhelming odds, Jews in scores of ghettos and even in three of the six death camps engaged in armed resistance. Others escaped to the country-side and joined the partisans in an effort to sabotage Nazi forces and save their fellow Jews.

Activity Instructions

Have students research specific examples of rescue and resistance in France and throughout occupied Europe during World War II. As students share their findings, discuss:

- Why was resistance so difficult? Why was rescue so rare?
- On what did rescuers base their decisions to act? What risks did they take?
- Were the acts of these resistors and rescuers “heroic”? What makes someone a hero?
- What issues might we take a stand on in the world today?
- What would we risk by taking a stand on these issues?

Direct students to the suggested list of resources at the back of this guide for helpful starting points.

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Additional explorations for older students...

Once your students have a solid grasp of the film's historical context, you may want to help them make connections to other events in history. Below are some areas that you might explore. Be careful, though, in making links across time and place: Historical circumstances are always changing, and the various social, political, or economic factors surrounding one event may not apply in the same way to another situation.

The Case of Japanese North Americans in WWII

The lead character in *Pigeon* faced potential incarceration in occupied France. Students are probably familiar with the network of work camps, prison camps, concentration camps, and death camps that existed throughout occupied Europe. Many, however, may not be aware that Japanese-Americans were interned in detention camps in the U.S. during World War II. And from 1942 to 1945, over 21,000 Japanese-Canadians were forcibly evicted from their homes in British Columbia. Have students study these situations.

Discuss:

- What similarities are there between the French imprisonment of its citizens and the internment of Japanese-Americans? What are the differences?
- What were the historical motivations and antecedents for each?
- What was the public reaction?
- When is nationalism a good thing, and when does it go too far?

The Case of the Spanish *Conversos*

Like the man in the film, Jews have often been forced to conceal their identities in order to escape persecution. One of the most famous examples occurred in medieval Spain, when the Catholic Church and the rulers of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, began the Inquisition. Lasting for 400 years, the Inquisition was a papal "court" which tried and convicted Jews, Muslims, and Protestants of the crime of being non-Catholic. Hundreds of non-Catholics were faced with the decision to convert or be tortured and killed. Many Jews therefore converted — at least publicly — to save their lives and the lives of their families. There was a sizable community of *conversos*, or converted ones, who continued to practice their religion in secret.

Discuss:

- How is the case of the *conversos* similar to or different from the predicament of the film's main character?
- Jews in Spain could convert in order to save their lives. Jews under the Nazis did not have that option.
 - What is the difference between anti-Judaism and racial **anti-Semitism**?
 - Is that distinction important? Why?
- Some rabbinic authorities suggest that a person should choose death over idolatry.
 - Why do you think that is? What do you think about that?

JEWISH VALUES

The climactic moment of the film, when the woman steps forward and speaks for the protagonist, is a remarkable illustration of a central Jewish tenet: the obligation to save a life. Kindness to others (*gemilut hasadim*) and repairing the world (*tikkun olam*) are also traditional values that are reflected in the characters' actions. The selflessness exhibited by the man when he saves the pigeon from the boys, and by the woman when she saves the man from the Nazis, are both acts of *gemilut hasadim* and of *tikkun olam*.

You might begin by discussing the importance of Jewish values:

- What are values? What are Jewish values?
- What examples of Jewish values did you see in the film? How were they shown?

Saving a Life

Like most Jewish values, the value of saving a life has its origin in traditional Jewish texts. Ask students to examine some of these texts and discuss their deeper meanings. Jewish text study is traditionally carried out with a partner, so you may want to have students pair up for this activity.

“He who saves a life, it is as if he has saved the whole world.”

— Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4.5

- What is the surface meaning of this text? Does this make sense? What is the deeper significance of this text? How does this text relate to real world situations?

At first, these words make no sense: how can saving one person's life be just as miraculous and meaningful as saving billions of lives? Comparing one life to the well-being of the entire world makes it clear that each single life is infinitely precious; expending the energy and risk to save one life emphasizes that each life is worthy of such energy and risk. Allowing someone to die, on the other hand, suggests that life is cheap and that no one — and by extension, the whole of the world's population — is worthy of being saved from an untimely death.

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have placed before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life...”

— Deuteronomy 30.20

- What does it mean to “choose life?” What situations would require someone to “choose life?”
- What if choosing life means choosing not to follow other commandments?

*In Judaism, nothing is considered more important than the **mitzvah** of saving a life — even when that means breaking a law. Doctors, for instance, are obligated to perform life-saving surgery on Shabbat. People using life-sustaining medicines are obligated to break the fast on Yom Kippur to take their medicine. This suggests that maintaining your own life is just as important as saving someone else's. If people know that they have the opportunity to save a life, either their own or someone else's, they shouldn't let anything stand in their way.*