



LESSON PLAN: Holocaust Survivors' "Return to Life"

1 Begin this lesson with a discussion about how students imagine survivors felt after liberation. The following questions can help guide this discussion:

- How do you imagine survivors felt after learning they were liberated?
- What do you imagine some of their fears were?
- The phrase "Return to Life" is often used in connection with the period immediately following liberation. What do you think were the first things the survivors needed in order to "Return to Life"?
- Do you think the phrase accurately captures the Jewish experience at this time? Explain your thinking.

2 Introduce students to **Dennis Urstein (bio)**, **Henry Mikols (bio)**, and **David Abrams (bio)** and then show their clips of testimony. Follow with a discussion using some or all of the questions below.

- How does Dennis Urstein describe conditions in Dachau prior to liberation?
- What does Dennis remember about the day of liberation and the days immediately following?
- Dennis mentions that the American soldiers reminded him of a character from his childhood. What is the significance of this memory?
- What conflicting emotions does Dennis explain he felt after learning he was free?
- What does Henry Mikols remember of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen?
- Henry says that he remembers feeling that maybe he was one of "the chosen ones." Do you think this was a common feeling among survivors? How might a feeling like that carry with it a tremendous responsibility in the minds of survivors?
- What other emotions do you think survivors probably experienced after liberation?
- Who does David Abrams say he found upon arriving home?
- Why do you think David wanted to walk up to his house rather than accept the ride that was offered to him? What do you think the walk symbolized for him?

3 Allow time for students to consider the range of emotions that Jews felt after liberation¹. Ask them to consider the following questions:

- Why was it impossible for Jews to completely embrace the idea of freedom after liberation?
- What obstacles did survivors still have to overcome—physically, emotionally, and psychologically? What obstacles did survivors still have to overcome—physically, emotionally, and psychologically?
- What feelings and emotions might those who had been able to escape Nazi-occupied Europe have had to contend with after learning the personal and general extent of the devastation during the Holocaust?

4 Distribute the **Holocaust 1944** and **When It Happened** handouts. By way of introduction, tell students that each of these poems was written by a Jewish woman who escaped from Nazi Europe in the late 1930s as a young child. They both spent their childhood in England. In their poems, they examine the questions of guilt and duty with which many survivors struggle.

5 Assign half the class the poem “Holocaust 1944” and the other half “When It Happened.” Have students break into pairs, making sure that both partners have been assigned the same poem.

6 Allow time for students to read and discuss their assigned poem with their partners. Have some or all of the following questions posted on the board or on chart paper to help students organize their discussions:

- Who is the speaker in the poem? To whom is the speaker speaking? What is their relationship to one another?
- Describe what you think the speaker’s experience might have been.
- Describe what you think the “listener’s” (the person to whom the speaker is speaking) experience might have been. What specific words or phrases in the poem support your answer?
- What emotions is the speaker experiencing? What do you think might be causing these emotions?
- How did the progression of stanzas include increasing degrees of the speaker’s recognition of what was going on? How do these changing degrees of recognition seem to impact the poet’s sense of self?
- What is the theme of the poem? Pick out one line or stanza that you believe contributed significantly to the theme of the poem and explain why you selected this particular line or stanza.

¹ Encourage students to visit the online exhibit *Life after the Holocaust* (<https://www.ushmm.org/exhibition/life-after-holocaust/>). This exhibition documents the experiences of six Holocaust survivors whose journeys brought them to the United States and reveals the complexities of starting over.

- What questions are left unanswered for you, as the reader? Why are these questions unanswered?
- What do you think the poet's motivation was for writing this poem?

7 After the class discusses the poems in pairs, come back together as a whole group. Read both poems as a class and conduct a whole-group discussion, allowing students to lead the discussion using their reflections and ideas from the pair-work. Encourage students to listen for different interpretations by other groups that read the same poem that they did.

ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME: 60-90 MINUTES