

'After the War' Key Stage 3 Religious Education KS3 Lesson Years 7-8

Yossi's struggle: 'How could God let this happen?'

Note to teachers: This RE lesson draws on the novel *After the War* by Tom Palmer to explore the Holocaust and the disturbing effect of it on young teenage survivors who, after liberation, were brought to Windermere in the Lake District to begin a new life in this country. Beautifully written, the novel gently reveals how the teenagers struggled with the traumatic memories of what they had gone through and the knowledge that (in most cases) their parents were dead. It helps Year 7 or 8 students **better understand how the emotional wounds of the past could not easily heal and how life for these youngsters would never be the same again**. Even though many of the children spent their time at Windermere enjoying sports and relearning how to have fun – the pain was never far away and only needed the slightest trigger to return, in their mind's eye, to their agonising past. This group of survivor children became affectionately known as '**The Boys**' or sometimes **The Windermere Boys** - even though some were girls.

Many had come from orthodox or traditional backgrounds that were steeped in the traditions, culture and rhythm of a Jewish way of life. However, the experience of the Holocaust caused *some* to struggle with their faith and relationship with God. Yossi – one of the characters in the novel, on recalling a horrific attack on his grandfather by several Nazis who had discovered him worshipping in a secret ghetto synagogue, wrestles with the question '**How could God let this happen?**'

This lesson aims to help students better understand:

- The suffering of Jewish people during the Holocaust particularly life in the ghettos.
- How painful memories are not easily healed
- **That people respond in different ways to suffering in terms of how it affects their faith, belief in God and connection with religion.**
- Extend /reinforce understanding of Jewish religion and concepts of the nature of God.

It aims to achieve this through: examining the historical content of the Holocaust and the experience of The Boys when they first came to Britain; exploring Jewish traditional beliefs on the nature of God and the idea of Covenant; close reading of 3 extracts from the novel *After the War*; examining testimonies of actual survivors and compare/contrast their Jewish faith after the war with that of the fictional character of Yossi and his friend Mordechai.

This lesson will provide a foundation for a more advanced study of faith, theodicy and the 'problem of evil' in Religious Education, study of Jewish belief and practice and the history and legacy of the Holocaust in Year 9. It aims to build religious literacy and promote SMSC by helping to understand those who hold a religious world view.

The lesson is 1 hour in duration or can be divided into two lessons – You may wish to divide the PowerPoint presentation in this way: Slides 1-10 (historical and theological contextualisation) followed by Slides 11-20 (analysis of *After the War* and questions of comparison with the testimonies of survivors).

Lesson objective: To reflect upon how suffering during the Holocaust affected faith.

Starter	<p>Slides 1-2: Introduce the learning:</p> <p>Slide 3 – class exploration of the concept of faith.</p> <p>Ask students what ‘faith’ means to them? Draw out suggestions for alternative words or phrases to describe what students associate with the idea of ‘faith’ to ensure understanding. Elaborate with examples and meanings of the words in bold when trying to extract comprehension to this concept.</p> <p>Create a mind map/word cloud of ideas and through questioning and class discussion, draw out examples of faith.</p>
Context History	<p>Slides 4-6, as stimuli to introduce students to the context/stimuli of this lesson: Explain, that by studying extracts from a fictional story, and comparing with the testimonies of those who lived that history, we are going to explore how individuals responded differently to a very specific adverse situation, in terms of their religious faith. Explain that we will focus on Yossi, a <i>composite character</i> (not a real person, but a character whose story was drawn from the experiences of several of the Windermere Boys) from Tom Palmer’s <i>After the War</i>.</p> <p>Establish / remind students what is meant by ‘The Holocaust’. Nearly all Jewish life in Europe was destroyed. The Nazis were intent on murdering every Jewish person, everywhere. Be sure to add that by the end of the war 1.5 million Jewish children had been murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. Most of the young survivors were therefore alone. Their brother, sisters, parents and grandparents were dead. They were broken, suffering from years of starvation, brutality and living in fear. Their physical recovery would take some time to mend but the emotional trauma would leave a lasting impression. For some, this effected an individual’s faith, identity, and connection with religion and God.</p> <p><i>Introduce the Windermere Boys, the Holocaust etc – and context of the novel.</i></p> <p>*See the <u>Introduction and Guidance notes</u> for additional historical context and summary information about <i>After the War</i></p>
Context Judaism	<p>Slides 8-10 Using the artistic representation provided explain to students the idea of covenant as a promise that God made to Abraham (the founder of Judaism) – a biblical account recorded in the Old Testament. According to the covenant, God would offer protection, care and land to Abraham and his descendants (the Jewish people), but they must, in turn, follow the path of God and stay true His law. God promised Abraham that the people would flourish and be as abundant in number as the stars in the sky. This idea is central idea in orthodox Judaism - an unbreakable bond between the Jewish people and God. Many Jews believe that the nature of God is all knowing (omniscient), all loving (omni-benevolent), all powerful (omnipotent) and exists everywhere (omni-present).</p>

	<p>Ultimately, there is a belief that God is fair and just. Encourage students to use the religious terms.</p> <p>Slides 9 & 10 demonstrate how the Jewish people ‘follow the path of God and stay true to His law’ by observing the Sabbath, synagogue worship, and marking holy days such as Rosh Hashanah, and following the Torah.</p>
<p>Analysis and Discussion</p>	<p>Use slides 11 – 15, or copies of <i>After the War</i> for close-read of the extracts taken from Chapter 11. Check student comprehension and encourage reflection with questioning and discussion.</p> <p>To support you in this, notes are provided within the PowerPoint slides with possible discussion points, specific questions, activities or avenues of response.</p> <p>E.g: Ask students: What 3 words would you use to describe how Yossi is feeling in this extract? (Perhaps create a class word cloud)</p> <p>Ensure students understand the context of the Holocaust sufficiently to appreciate the risks that are being taken by his grandfather and others to pray in the secret ghetto synagogue. What does this show about how piety of his grandfather? What does it show about his trust in God and how committed he is to continue to honour the idea of the covenant?</p> <p>Invite responses to the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What does the author imply about the Nazi’s intentions when he states: <i>‘They did it on a Friday at nightfall. Just so it hurt all the more.’</i> And 2. What was so significant about ‘Friday night’? 3. What is revealed about what was known and shared about religious activity in the ghetto and the associated risks when the author writes: <i>‘You were not supposed to speak about it, even to people in your family, in case you were overheard’.</i> 4. Drawing on what you have learned about the idea of The Covenant, can you explain what Yossi is struggling with when he poses the question: ‘How could God let this happen?’ 5. Extract 3 ends with Yossi being invited to join a sabbath service at Windermere. His friend Mordechai is keen to go. Explain why Yossi reply is: ‘I cannot’
<p>Self Reflection and Discussion</p>	<p>Use slide 16, 17 & 18 to encourage reflection on Yossi’s bafflement with God’s absence and lack of intervention in the ‘evil’ taking place in the ghetto. Compare Yossi’s conflict in relation to his traditional understanding of God and worship with the perspectives of the two ‘real’ survivors. Lipa and Solly were both part of The Boys. They were born in Poland into orthodox Jewish families – just like the characters of Mordechai and Yossi. Solly’s</p>

	<p>religious position was possibly more aligned with the character of Mordechai (Yossi's friend). He never wavered but clung to his faith before during and after the war.</p> <p>Lipa's connection with God, on the other hand, was shattered after the war. The following quote from Lipa very much reflects the mood, sense of crisis and abandonment that Yossi was wrestling with. Lipa states:</p> <p>'My entire world had fallen to pieces'</p> <p>'I was primitive' '.....believed implicitly in a God who was all powerful'.</p> <p>So, in light of this, ask students to reflect on why some lost faith while others drew comfort from it. Faith is personal and unique to the individual. How does the testimonies of Lipa and Solly link with those of Mordechai and Yossi? Where are their differences? Where do responses overlap?</p> <p>Capture student class discussion by completing the Venn diagram</p>
<p>Bringing it together</p>	<p>Using slide 19 - the visual representation of covenant, bring together the lesson with the following prompt questions and annotate the picture:</p> <p>What, for example, might the stars represent?</p> <p>Who might be the person with outstretched arms?</p> <p>How or what does it reveal about the Jewish belief about the nature of God?</p> <p>Can one draw inspiration from it? Is it a hopeful or helpless image? Is it imploring or praising?</p> <p>Do you think the survivors of the Holocaust can ever heal from the trauma of what they experienced?</p> <p>Should Yossi's have questioned the actions of <i>human beings</i> during the Holocaust rather than the seemingly non-action of God, or is it legitimate to ask <i>How could God let this happen?</i></p> <p>In what way does a religious education help to reflect on ultimate questions - ones that hold mystery yet continue to challenge us?</p>
<p>Extension</p>	<p>To build on this work consider researching the life of one or more of the real-life Windermere Boys - for example, Sir Ben Helfgott and Solly Irving.</p> <p>Suitable websites include: https://45aid.org/45-aid-society/</p> <p>https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-devon-41621085</p> <p>https://www.theguardian.com/global/2018/may/08/ben-helfgott-interview-weightlifter-nazis-concentration-camps-refugee</p>