

Supplemental Lesson and Activity Book

for

THE SILENT WITNESS

by

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Set in New Orleans (pre-Katrina), *The Silent Witness* captures the spirit of the city and celebrates the Jewish family through an edge-of-your seat courtroom drama about a centuries old heirloom prayer book.

Before You Read

Keep the words that follow in your mind as you read the story. Let it help guide you in understanding the different perspectives presented by the characters.

FROM THE AUTHOR:

“The plot idea came from the case of the Lubavitch library back in 1988. I was very moved by the Lubavitcher Rebbe's statement that "books have souls." I am interested in trans-generational connections - what bolsters memory and meaning and stays alive from one generation to the next. I also wanted to write about family dynamics, and present the family in a positive but realistic manner. Too many stories focused on conflicts within families or families torn apart.”

Pre-Reading Activities

1. _____ Research pre-Katrina New Orleans by reading and discussing articles about the lifestyle in New Orleans in the early 1980s.
2. _____ Get a map of New Orleans prior to 1985 and familiarize yourself with the layout of the city in terms of neighborhoods, major streets, major sites and location of natural features.
3. _____ Gain an understanding of the demographics of Jewish New Orleans in the early 1980s by researching and charting the following:
 - a. _____ Total population of the city
 - b. _____ Jewish population
 - c. _____ Number of synagogues
 - d. _____ Number of Jewish schools and organizations
 - e. _____ Growth of the Jewish population over time
 - f. _____ Include any other significant information you find when researching.
4. _____ Research how old and rare books are valued both in quality and price.

Chapter 1

Terms to Know:

curmudgeon, TEMS, Mardi Gras, convulsive, giddy

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. What time of day and event does the story begin with and why do you think it is significant to the development of the plot?
2. Who are the major and minor characters introduced in this first section of the story? Include in your answer:
 - a. How do you differentiate between a major and minor character?
 - b. Based on the previous question why did you classify the characters the way you did.
3. Create a chart or graphic organizer of the characters in this section that identifies:
 - a. The name of the character
 - b. The role of the character in the story
 - c. The approximate age and gender of the character
 - d. At least two character traits.
 - e. NOTE: Leave room in the chart/graphic organizer for additions later.
4. What is it about Shammai's state of mind that connects him with the time of day and upcoming event that is the setting for this section?
5. Explain what is meant by the phrase "...the soul of the shul"? Give a personal example to help illustrate your point.
6. From Dinah Chaya's perspective what was Mr. Epstein's disposition when she arrived and how did it affect her mood?
7. What is the object that Dinah Chaya has with her when she leaves Mr. Epstein's house and what were its specific characteristics as described by Shammai?

Related Activities

1. Using a map of New Orleans trace the route Shammai took to get to Mr. Epstein's house and determine which neighborhood the story takes place.
2. Create a list of what minimum books constitute the essentials of a personal library (Judaic or otherwise). Describe each book and justify why it should be a selection.
3. Design a guide on the use of a blech for someone who
 - a. has never used one before,
 - b. how it relates to the laws of Shabbos, and
 - c. the benefits and advantages of using one in order to help one observe the laws of Shabbos.
4. Arrange or take part in a class to learn CPR.

The First Inscription - 1845

Terms to Know:

peasant, amnesia

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. In a brief paragraph identify and describe the characters that appear in this section.
2. What is the significance of the father's story to the son?
3. Who is the father describing in the beginning of the section? What is it about him the father finds so fascinating and why?
4. What war was the father describing and what effects did it have on the Jews of that time and location?
5. What aspect of the brocha given by the Rabbi do you feel was the catalyst for the father's recovery?
6. Why do you feel the father is so adamant that the son inscribe his name in the siddur?
7. Select two of the many uses of symbolism in this section and explain their meanings.
8. Explain the meaning of the following quote from this section:
"But, even if the siddur was officially mine, so long as my father was alive, I would not write my name in it."

Related Activities

1. Research the Napoleonic wars and their effect on the Jewish communities of the time.
2. Based on the time frame of 1845, who were the major tzaddikim of the time and could any of them have been the rabbi mentioned in this section of the story.
3. Compare and contrast the lifestyle of Jews of France and the Jews of Russia in 1845.
4. What are the elements needed to create a brocha?

Chapter 2

In this chapter we are introduced to some new characters and the characters introduced in chapter one have become better understood.

Terms to Know:

witticism, geriatrics, morbidity

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. List all of the characters in the story so far and create a character map on each.
 - a. The character map should include at least the following:
 - i. Physical Characteristics (age, gender, etc).
 - ii. Their relationship to the other characters.
 - iii. Their apparent (superficial) personality traits as presented by the description and dialogue in the story.
 - iv. Their inner personality. This is who they are on the inside and how they think and reason. This will call for your perspective based on their actions and dialogue. Be prepared to back up your perspective with examples from the story.
1. Using the information in the story and the information you created in the character map, create a “Character Interaction Web” which shows the interpersonal relationships between the characters.
2. Does the atmosphere, practices and traditions of the Shabbos meal create a more adversarial and tense environment in the house or is it the catalyst that brings order to a hectic and chaotic situation? Backup your opinion with examples from the story and from other sources. Be sure to cite your sources.
3. Start a character map and separate character interaction web for the *siddur*.

Related Activities

1. Research the different opinions and laws concerning what is allowed in asking a non-Jew to do certain tasks on Shabbos. Create a chart or presentation or brochure of what is allowed, not allowed and what (if any) procedures must be followed when interacting with a non-Jew on Shabbos, with the intent of getting something done that a Jew is not permitted to do.
2. Create a presentation that illustrates the various family and/or cultural traditions that someone would see and experience at different Shabbos meals.

Chapter 3 & The Second Inscription - 1885

Terms to Know:

perfunctory, cryptic, aphoristic,

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. In this chapter, for the second time the author writes that Eli reaches up to touch the mezuzah. It has been established that the major characters are religious Jews that in most likelihood also kiss the mezuzah when they go into a room. Why do you think that the author has singled out Eli's action?
2. In Chapters 3 and Interlude 2 there appear to be two settings that each have an emotional connection. The first is when the boy asks his father about his first memory of Mr. Einstein. What emotional scene in Interlude 2 seems to be connected to that question? Explain the basis of your viewpoint. Try drawing from specific things mentioned earlier in the book to help support your view.
3. There is a second emotional scene in Interlude 2 that has an emotional connection back to a scene in Chapter 3. It comes at the end of Interlude 2 when they have decided to go ahead with the arrangement. What is the scene from Chapter 3 and what is the emotion? Explain the basis of your viewpoint. Try drawing from specific things mentioned earlier in the book to help support your view.
4. In Interlude 2 Kalman Hoch is described as having "a heart of gold". What does that phrase mean? Is there an equivalent phrase in Yiddish or Hebrew? If so, what are they and how close are their actual meanings?

Related Activities

1. Research the different opinions and laws concerning arranged marriages in the late 1880s. Include in your research the differences between the customs, traditions and acceptable practices between the various communities in European countries as well as between the Jewish communities from various parts of the world.
2. Research rare book collecting and address the following questions:
 - a. How does it work?
 - b. How are books valued?
 - c. Where are most rare books bought and sold?
 - d. What are rare book collectors called?
 - e. What defines whether a book is rare or not?

Chapter 4

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. In the beginning of Chapter 4 the temperature of Shammai and Hannah's coffee is mentioned several times. How does this come to symbolize or represent Shammai and Hannah's personalities and/or relationship?
2. What is a will and how is it prepared and executed?
3. What is an executor and what is their responsibility in regards to a will?

Chapter 5

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. What is the significance of a piano sonata from the romantic period played at the beginning of Chapter 5?
2. When Shammai and Elie got to the hospital, Elie wanted to continue to listen to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata which was on the car radio. Then at a certain point in the piece he was ready to get out and go to the hospital. Listen to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata and select which part of the piece Elie was ready to exit the car. Explain and justify your selection.

Chapter 6

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. What do you think was Shammai's reasons for the following:
 - a. Bringing the siddur to the funeral,
 - b. Going over to talk to Kashdan before the funeral,
 - c. Having Elie take his place as a pallbearer,
 - d. Feeling the need to say a few words at the end of the funeral.
2. Why would Shammai say that "Mr. Einstein was a grandfather to my children"?
3. Why did Elie respond later to his father that "...you know, he wasn't our grandfather"?

Related Activities

1. Research the laws and customs of the Chevra Kadisha.

2. There are many different practices at a Jewish funeral. Which ones are according to Jewish law and which are customs/traditions?
3. What are the rules pertaining to who can say the Kaddish?

Chapter 7

Terms to Know:

camaraderie, fetid, shyster, enigmatic, codicil

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. During their conversation in his office Lazar tells Shammai "...you'd rather have a few books you can read than a lot you can't. A big personal library is an embarrassing reminder of how much time we waste."
 - a. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
 - b. Is it more important to have a large, complete personal library or a smaller one in which you have actually read each and every book?
2. Based on Lazar's interpretation of the will the *siddur* belongs to Shammai. Do you agree or disagree with his opinion. Use the text of the will in your argument.

Chapter 8

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. We begin to see Shammai and Elie express their feelings verbally. Create a graphic organizer that will track the following for these two characters. Be sure each has an explanation, reference or example from the story.
 - a. Feelings
 - b. Frustrations
 - c. Conflict Points with the other character
 - d. Emotional Triggers
 - e. Key Terms that each constantly verbalizes
2. What is an unveiling and what are the laws and customs associated with it.
3. During the unveiling Mr. Levinsky eulogized Mr. Epstein with the statement, "He gave his life over to what he left behind. Everyone should understand that." The characters did not understand the statement, but Shammai thought that he did. What do you think

Mr. Levinsky meant and do you feel that Shammai actually did understand it? Why or why not?

The Third Inscription - 1899

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. Using a map of Europe trace Chaim's route from his home to Paris.
2. Research the town of Dubrovno and briefly describe its Jewish History.
3. Using the information from this section and the two previous "Inscription" sections create a timeline of the *siddur* which includes the dates, the characters and the connections between them. You will add to this timeline as the story continues.
4. Based on the life of a gentleman from 1900 Paris and a poor yeshiva student from Eastern Europe, what changes in his life could Chaim now expect to experience?
5. Why do you think Chaim's rebbe insisted that he accept the inheritance from his uncle?

Chapters 9 - 12 ~ Pre-Trial

Terms to Know:

volition, consanguinity

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. Through his conversations more of Shammai's feelings and frustrations become evident. Add them to the character graphic organizer for Shammai and see if there is a correlation with the feelings expressed by Elie and/or is there now a deeper communication between Shammai and Hannah?
2. During the period of time before the advent of a trial there are some renewed conversations between Shammai, Dinah Chaya and Elie. Which of these characters interacted with each other and what were the results of the reopened dialogue? Did their conversations lead to continued tension, reconciliation or a newly defined relationship/ understanding? Cite examples from the text to reinforce your views.
3. There are many local landmarks mentioned during Shammai and Lazar's ride downtown to the opposing lawyer's office. Using your map of New Orleans mark these sites and trace a possible route. Research further to ascertain what, if any, damage these landmarks may have received as a result of Hurricane Katrina.
4. Using the setting, character descriptions, dialogue and mannerisms of Lazar Blum and Fredrick Findlay compare and contrast the two lawyers with emphasis on their style, approach and strategy towards this case.

The Fourth Inscription - 1917

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. "The Fourth Inscription" took place during the Russian Revolution. Research the history of the Russian Revolution and develop an outline and/or timeline that shows significant events related to this moment in history.
2. What was the Jewish involvement in the Russian Revolution?
3. How was the Jewish community and culture of the time affected by the Russian Revolution?
4. Is there a connection between the time period of this inscription and its placement in the timeline of the story? Justify your answer.

Chapters 13 - 17 ~ Trial: Day One

Terms to Know:

mortis causa, inclinations, aficionado, clique, obstinacy, bibliophile, onerous

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

Chapter 13

1. Up to this point in the story, whenever Mr. Levinsky appears and speaks it seems to leave the other characters confused. It is as if Mr. Levinsky's words are like clues to a puzzle. Do the following:
 - a. Review Mr. Levinsky's conversation with Shammai and Hannah at the zoo.
 - b. Put each statement he made on a slip of paper.
 - c. Go back to previous statements made by Mr. Levinsky and put those on a slips of paper.
 - d. Treat each slip of paper like a clue or bit of evidence from a crime scene and see if you can detect a pattern or purpose in what he is saying.
 - e. Keep the slips together as you continue through the rest of the story and every time Mr. Levinsky makes a statement put it on a slip of paper.
 - f. Keep analyzing the statements and see if you can predict the outcome before the end of the story.

Chapter 14

1. Which lawyer, Lazar or Findlay, do you think won the first round based on their questioning of Mr. Heuerstein, the bookseller? Explain your reasons.
2. At the end of his cross examination of Mr. Heuerstein, Lazar had a "one more thing" moment and asked when Mr. Heuerstein acquired the *siddur*. How is his answer significant to Lazar's trial strategy?
3. At one point in Mr. Heuerstein's testimony Mr. Findley asks if he was Jewish.
 - a. Mr. Heuerstein denies being Jewish but states that "My paternal grandfather was (Jewish)". Research and review the laws regarding how Jewishness is determined.
4. What was Mr. Findley insinuating by saying "But your name? Your names, actually," when Mr. Heuerstein denied he was Jewish? Please explain your reasoning.

Chapter 15

1. Use Mr. Levinsky's testimony and his previous statements, which you placed on the slips of paper. Write a brief descriptive essay on the relationship between Mr. Levinsky and Mr. Enstein, and your prospective on Mr. Levinsky's true feelings and attitude towards Mr. Enstein.

Chapter 16 & 17

1. Compare and contrast Kashdan's testimony with that of Josh's testimony. Be sure to utilize in your answer the type and method of questioning used by both attorneys and the way in which the witnesses answered.

Chapter 18 & 19

Terms to Know:

recalcitrant

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. In these chapters we observe more of Hannah's thoughts and personality. Using previous appearances of Hannah and her participation in Chapters 18 and 19, do the following activities:
 - a. Using a graphic organizer create a character map of Hannah
 - b. Write a character sketch of Hannah as if you were describing a real person.
 - c. From your character sketch of Hannah, write a story that places her in another situation outside this storyline.
 - d. Write a character sketch of yourself, but write it from the third person. Make it from the perspective of a family member or a friend.
 - e. Besides being Shammai's wife, what abstract role does Hannah appear to play in relation to Shammai?

Chapters 20 - 22 ~ Trial: Day Two

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. Chapters 13 - 17 and 20 - 22 were scenes where a witness for the prosecution was called to testify. In each chapter Mr. Findley approached each witness differently in order to obtain a particular result. Create a chart that illustrates the following:
 - a. The chapter
 - b. The character that is the witness in that chapter
 - c. Relationship to Shammai
 - d. Profession
 - e. General context of the questions asked by Mr. Findley
 - f. Mr. Findley's behaviors, actions and/or theatrics during the questioning
 - g. Mr. Findley's strategy/objective for the specific witness
 - h. Did Mr. Findley achieve his goal for the specific witness?
 - i. Any after effects on the witness as a result of testifying
1. During questioning Mr. Findley would tap his pen. He would do it at times on different places, such as on the back of his hand or in the palm of his hand. Is there pattern to these actions? Is there a frequency to the tapping that varies based on what he asks or how he asks? Write a brief three paragraph descriptive essay that addresses these questions. Present your essay to the class and prepare to defend your theory.

Chapter 23 & 24

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. It was mentioned in an earlier chapter that there was a reporter in the courtroom observing the trial. Pretend you are that reporter. Write a news article on the trial in which the reporter starts the events at the beginning of Chapter 23.
 - a. Remember to use the 5WH of journalism
 - i. Who, What, Where, When, Why, How
 - b. Use Chapter 23 as the attention grabbing news piece of the article
 - c. Use Chapter 24 as the after-the-fact human interest follow-up part of the article
 - d. For characters in the story that were not mentioned in these chapters but would have been present during the events of this chapter, create quotes that would fit their character profile in the story.
2. Write a "One Year Later" type magazine article that takes a retrospective look at the events of the story.
 - a. Start with results of the actions Mr. Levinsky took during his trip to New York, actions that he and Shammai discussed in the airport a year earlier (when he was carrying Dinah Chaya's bag to the gate).
 - b. Include interviews with the main characters.
 - c. Include a "where are they now" section.
 - d. Describe the state of the shul and the status of the relationships of the members.

The Fifth Inscription - 1990

Questions, Discussions & Activities:

1. Finalize your timeline of the book.
2. What was it that Mr. Einstein saw in Elie and Shammai, both individually and together in their relationship?
3. After reading the story,
 - a. How do you feel?
 - b. Why do you feel the way that you do?
 - c. When in the story did you feel you had an understanding of the writer's focus?
 - d. Where in the story did you begin to identify with one of the characters?
 - e. What was the one emotion that either connected you with story or distanced you from the story?
 - f. Who, in your opinion, was the true main character and why?

Post Reading Activities

1. Create a play of the story and perform it.
2. Reenact the trial in the story but instead of a civil court have the case tried by a Beis Din.
3. Based on the evidence in the story what Judaic laws would be applicable to this case? Compare and contrast the Judaic laws to the Civil laws referred to in the story.
4. The mitzvah of caring for the elderly is mentioned in the story. List the various mitzvahs mentioned in the story. Which are obligatory and which non-compulsory?