

I.L. Peretz's "The Magician"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/il-peretz-magician>.

Introduction

Joyce Carol Oates once wrote that all great stories start one of two ways: someone goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town. In this charming story by I. L. Peretz, the stranger is a magician who fascinates the townspeople, and then saves Passover for an indigent couple. Later, the couple concludes that the magician was really the prophet Elijah, a key figure in the Passover seder.

While there are many wonderful translations of this short story, the contents of this kit are based on Hillel Halkin's translation in *The I.L. Peretz Reader* (New Haven: Yale University, 2002).

Cover image: Marc Chagall's illustration of the Magician, published in I.L. Peretz *Der kuntsenmakher*, 1917.

Subjects

Eastern Europe, Fiction, Folklore, Jewish Holidays, Money, Tanakh, Translation, Yiddish

Reading and Background

- "The Magician" is a short story by I. L. Peretz, one of the foundational writers of the Yiddish canon. Read this [entry in the YIVO Encyclopedia](#) to learn more about Peretz's life and work.
- The YIVO Encyclopedia also offers useful information about the artist Marc Chagall (who illustrated an early edition of "The Magician"), and [his connections to Yiddish](#).
- For auditory learners, it may be helpful to listen to Renée Brachfield's [retelling](#) of "The Magician." Brachfield is a storyteller, and rather than reading a particular version of the story, here she tells her own version, complete with sound effects.
- It is important for students to understand who Elijah the Prophet is in Jewish folklore. [This YIVO Encyclopedia article](#) summarizes the roles that Elijah has played in both the written and the oral tradition.
- Magic has a long history in Jewish ritual and practice. For a general overview of the role of magic in Jewish history, see "[The Weird and Wondrous World of Jews and Magic](#)" or the YIVO Encyclopedia entry on magic. Sefaria also has a large collection of source sheets on magic and sorcery including "[Magic and Sorcery: Exodus 22:17](#)," and "[Witches Get Stitches: Jewish Approaches to the Occult Through the Ages](#)." Joshua Trachtenberg's book *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) is a helpful resource for those who wish to dive deeper into Jewish experiences of the occult.

Resources

1: Text excerpts, "The Magician," 2002, and "The Conjuror," 1978.

Because I. L. Peretz wrote the original story, *Der kuntsenmakher*, in Yiddish, non-Yiddish speakers encounter the story in translation. Each translator interprets the text differently, and even though they are all translating the same story, each one creates an entirely new text.

Suggested Activity: Have students begin by reading the title and the first line of each excerpt out loud. One story is about a "magician" and the other story is about a "conjuror." What associations do students have with each of these words? One of the stories is set in "a town in Volhynia," while the other one is set in "a small Jewish town in eastern Poland." Are students familiar



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with Volhynia? Why might a translator choose to offer a specific town name or a more general geographical location?

Have students read both excerpts side by side, circling any differences. Ask them to focus on differences in tone and vocabulary, and on the way culturally specific concepts are handled. Using the circled words and phrases as a guide, ask: What audience do you think each translator had in mind when creating their translation? Which piece do you find more appealing, and why?

Source: I.L. Peretz, "The Magician," trans. Hillel Halkin in *The I.L. Peretz Reader* (New Haven: Yale University, 2002), 218.

Y.L. Peretz, "The Conjuror," trans. Joachim Neugroschel in *The Great Works of Jewish Fantasy and Occult* (London: Picador, 1978), 391.

n.b. You may notice that some sources write the author's name as "I. L. Peretz" and others cite him as "Y. L. Peretz." This is because the Hebrew and Yiddish letter ך (yud) has historically been transliterated both ways.

2: Illustration, Marc Chagall, 1917, and illustration, Uri Shulevitz, 1973.

Illustrations have accompanied Peretz's story, "The Magician," since its initial publication in Yiddish in 1917. These illustrations reflect not only the content of the story but also the artistic style of the time in which they were drawn.

Suggested Activity: Before sharing these illustrations with students, have them create their own illustrations of the Magician based on Peretz's description in the text. Students should be sure to include specific details from the text in their illustrations (e.g., turkeys, top hat.) Then, show students the two illustrations of the magician, one from Marc Chagall and one from Uri Shulevitz. Ask students: What part of the story do these images come from? Do these images of the magician look like the illustrations the students have created? Why or why not? Which of these images do they think is older? What qualities of the magician do they think each illustrator wanted to highlight? Which image do they think best illustrates the story?

Sources: Marc Chagall, *Untitled*, 1917, in I. L. Peretz, *Der kuntsenmakher* (Vilnius: B. A. Kletskin Press, 1917).

Uri Shulevitz, *Untitled*, 1973, in Uri Shulevitz, *The Magician* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 8.

3: Sefaria source sheet, "Hakhnoses orkhim," 2020.

Students may be confused as to why the Magician would feel so presumptuous that he would just walk into the home with barely a knock. The Jewish value of *hakhnoses orkhim*, or welcoming strangers, is central to understanding "The Magician." This value is at the heart of the Passover seder. As the character Chaim Yona remarks in the story, "All doors are open tonight—doesn't it say in the Passover Haggadah, 'Koyl dikhfin yeysey veyeykhul?' In plain language that means 'Let whoever is hungry come and eat'" (220).

Suggested Activity: Have students break into five groups, and assign each group a quote from the source sheet. Students should first read through the quote, and then try to "translate" or summarize it in more accessible language. In groups, students should return to the text of "The Magician" and find a passage that best exemplifies or explains their quote.

Sources: *Hakhnoses orkhim*. Source sheet compiled by Sadie Gold-Shapiro using sefaria.org, 2020.

4: Excerpt, "Elijah's Cup of Hope: Healing Through the Jewish Storytelling Tradition," 2005.

"The Magician" ends with the couple realizing that their guest was none other than Elijah the Prophet, a biblical character known for visiting in disguise to reveal the faith and morality of those he visits. During the Passover seder, it is traditional to pour a glass of wine for Elijah, and open the door to welcome him.

Suggested Activity: Students should read the excerpt from "Elijah's Cup of Hope" and reread the end of "The Magician," beginning with the Magician's arrival to the seder. By the end of the story, the couple is sure the Prophet Elijah has visited them. Why is the couple so certain that their visitor was Elijah? Ask students: Do they think the visitor in the story was the Prophet Elijah? Who else might he have been? What is the purpose of the Magician's visit? What moral does he impart to the couple? To the readers? What does it mean that the story is set during Passover, a time when Elijah is traditionally expected to visit?

The article talks about how Elijah's name means justice and mercy. Does the Magician in the story show these virtues? How? How does this tale "teach faith and restore hope?"

Source: Peninnah Schram, "Elijah's Cup of Hope: Healing Through the Jewish Storytelling Tradition." *Storytelling, Self, Society* 1, no. 2 (2005): 103-17, accessed [online](#).