

Sholem Asch's "God of Vengeance"

A GREAT JEWISH BOOKS TEACHER WORKSHOP RESOURCE KIT

Teachers' Guide

This guide accompanies resources that can be found at: <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/resource-kits/sholem-aschs-god-vengeance>.

Introduction

Written in 1907 and staged around the world to critical acclaim and—sometimes—controversy, Sholem Asch's Yiddish-language drama *Der got fun nekome* (*The God of Vengeance*) was enormously provocative in its time, and remains one of the most significant Jewish plays of the twentieth century. This kit provides resources to help teachers tell the story of this play, its uniquely fraught production history, and its historical significance.

Cover image: The cast, producer, and playwright of the Broadway production of *God of Vengeance*, found "guilty of presenting an immoral performance" in 1923. Lead actor Rudolph Schildkraut, a renowned performer from Austria, stands fourth from the left, in the front; the producer Harry Weinberger stands second from the right; and the playwright, Sholem Asch, is at the extreme right.

Subjects

New York, Performance, Sexuality, Theater, United States, Yiddish

Reading and Background:

- You can find an overview of the playwright's life and work in the [YIVO Encyclopedia](#).
- For an introduction to *God of Vengeance*, including a plot overview and production history, read "[Ten Things You Need to Know about God of Vengeance](#)," written by David Mazower for the Digital Yiddish Theatre Project. Mazower is the great-grandson of Sholem Asch, and his article is richly illustrated with items from his family's collection and various archives, including production photographs, drawings of actors in their costumes, posters, portraits of Asch and his family, and a program book from a 1922 production of the play in Greenwich Village.
- *The God of Vengeance*, translated into English by Isaac Goldberg and published in Boston in 1918, is freely available on [Google Books](#).
- Paula Vogel's Tony-nominated play *Indecent*, [published](#) by New York's Theatre Communications Group in 2017, creatively traces the history of *God of Vengeance*'s creation and controversies.
- In the play, the brothel-owner's daughter, Rifkele, and Manke, one of the sex-workers in his employ, share a famously tender encounter upon returning to the brothel on a rainy night. The scene, and the romantic passion between the two characters, have inspired both controversy and admiration for the way Asch depicts two women in love. Questions on the place of lesbianism in Jewish life, law, and thought are likely to arise upon a reading of the play. For insight into the topic, see this [survey](#) of lesbianism throughout Jewish history, written by Rabbi Rebecca T. Alpert and published in the Jewish Women's Archive Encyclopedia; or this [article](#) by Rabbi Elizabeth Sarah originally published in *The Jewish Quarterly* (Autumn 1993), which provides a survey of how the issue is treated in traditional rabbinical texts.
- Those interested in discovering more about Jews' involvement in prostitution, and in combating it, may seek out Edward Bristow's 1983 book [Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight Against White Slavery, 1870-1939](#).

Resources

1: Play excerpt, Sholem Asch's "God of Vengeance," 1907, Yiddish with English translation.

This excerpt is from the final scene of *God of Vengeance*, in which the young Rifkele's father, Yekel, and mother, Sarah, confront the girl about her relationship with Manke, one of the sex-workers employed by the parents. Yekel owns the brothel underneath the



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family's home, and Sarah formerly worked as a sex-worker herself, before her marriage to Yekel.

Suggested Activity: First, have students read the plot overview from “[Ten Things You Need to Know about *God of Vengeance*](#)” by David Mazower. Alternately, for teachers with more time to devote to this topic, they may read the entire play, freely available in English translation on [Google Books](#) and in the original Yiddish [here](#), digitized by the Yiddish Book Center.

Then have students read the scene silently and write down their initial impressions of the characters.

Next, in small groups, have students mark each character's major emotional shifts over the course of the scene.

Then, have groups work to stage the scene, paying close attention to and foregrounding the emotions of *one* character (assign each group a different character to focus on). Discuss: how does staging this scene alter your perception of the characters and the story? What lines bear the potential for the strongest emotional outlets for the characters? How did focusing on certain characters alter the scene?

Going further, ask students to discuss the sexual politics of the scene. How would they characterize the characters' attitudes to sex—in particular, same-sex relations, conventional sexual relations between a married man and woman, and sex-work? What is said and what is left unsaid? How does the way sexual issues are discussed or weaponized in the scene seem similar or different to how these matters are engaged with in the students' own environment today?

Source: Sholem Asch, *Got fun nekome: a drame in dray akten* (*God of Vengeance: A Drama in Three Acts*) (Warsaw: Ferlag gezelshaft "Tsentral" ["Central" Society Publishing House], 1913), 99-101, digitized by the Yiddish Book Center as part of its Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, <www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/yiddish-books/spb-nybc203692/asch-sholem-der-got-fun-nekome-a-drame-in-dray-akten>, accessed January 23, 2015.

Sholem Asch, *The God of Vengeance*, trans. Isaac Goldberg (Boston: The Stratford Co., 1918), 93-95.

2: Oral history video excerpt, David Mazower on Sholem Asch, “He was a Hugely Dramatic Personality,” 2011.

This is an excerpt from an oral history interview done with David Mazower, Sholem Asch's great-grandson. Mazower, who was born and raised in London, is a journalist, collector of rare Yiddish books, and researcher of Yiddish theatre. He currently works at the Yiddish Book Center as bibliographer and co-editor of *Pakn Treger*, the Center's journal.

Suggested Activity. Watch the video, then discuss in small groups: what kind of person does Asch seem to have been? Consider both Mazower's comments, and what writing of Asch's you have read. What are the advantages and disadvantages of learning about a historic or literary figure from a descendant, enough generations away to have never met the figure, but close enough to have heard family stories about him from those who knew him personally?

Source: David Mazower, “He Was a Hugely Dramatic Personality,” excerpt of interview by Hillary Ossip at the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, MA (Yiddish Book Center's Wexler Oral History Project, February 28, 2011), <www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/excerpts/woh-ex-0000208/he-was-hugely-dramatic-personality>, accessed February 3, 2018. For the complete interview with Mazower: <<https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories/interviews/woh-fi-0000074/david-mazower-2011>>, accessed February 3, 2018.

3: Article excerpts, “Filth and Vileness on the Yiddish Stage in New York,” October 18, 1907.

Upon the premiere of *God of Vengeance* on the New York Yiddish stage in 1907, a fierce debate was ignited among the city's leading Yiddish newspapers. Abe Cahan, the famed editor of the progressive newspaper *Forverts*, praised the drama, and printed it in its entirety from October 19 to October 30. On the other hand, around the same time an article appeared in the *Morgen zhurnal* (*Jewish Morning Journal*), an Orthodox Yiddish newspaper, presenting a blistering, ad hominem attack on the play, its author, its actors, and even its audiences. This resource is comprised of excerpts from that article, including those making reference to the “*unnatirlikhe liebe tsvishen froyen un froyen oder mener mit mener*” (“unnatural love between women and women or men and men”) that is said to be depicted in the play. (Rows of asterisks represent the beginning of a new excerpt from later in the article.) Interestingly, the author, identified as A. Tanenboym, admits to not having seen the play and having no plans to see it, but bases his judgments on descriptions of its content as reported in other Yiddish newspapers.

Suggested Activity: Have your students read the article in English and, if they have some Yiddish ability, in the original as well. Lead a discussion: on what grounds is the writer attacking the play? What are his main problems with it? Do you think such judgments are fair from someone who has not yet seen the play and has only read about it? Is there anything about the Jewish position in the United States in 1907 that may have contributed to the writer's emotional reaction? Can you imagine such an angry review being written today? If so, by whom and about what?

Source: A. Tanenboym, "Shmuts un nidertrekhtigkayt af der idisher bihne in nyu york" ("Filth and Vileness on the Yiddish Stage in New York"), *Der morgen zhurnal* (New York: October 18, 1907), 5, translated by Mikhl Yashinsky. Retrieved from <http://jpress.nli.org.il/Olive/APA/NLI/sharedpages/SharedView.Page.aspx?sk=49FB9D82&href=TJM/1907/10/18&page=5>, accessed January 23, 2018.

4: Article excerpts, "'God of Vengeance' Players Convicted," May 24, 1923.

This excerpt comes from an article published in *The New York Times* on the day after the cast and producer of Broadway's English-language performance of *God of Vengeance* were convicted on obscenity charges. It details the proceedings in the courtroom leading up to the jury's decision and explains the legal reasoning behind the charges. (Rows of asterisks represent the end of an excerpt—the excerpt that follows each is from later in the article.)

Suggested Activity: Have students read and discuss the article in small groups. They may read either these excerpts, or the entire article, which may be downloaded as a PDF and printed from the website of *The New York Times* [here](#).

Then, divide the class into two groups—one representing the prosecution and the other representing the defense. The prosecution's job is to argue that the play and its performers should be subject to obscenity charges. The opposing team's job is to defend the play from these charges. Ask each group to prepare an outline of its argument.

Then, ask groups to present their case for or against the play to the class. In their presentations, they may include arguments by a lawyer, testimony from witnesses (which the "witnesses" may base on their own imaginative looks backward at history, as well as background knowledge they may have gained of the play from items like the article in the *Morgen zhurnal* or David Mazower's oral history), and evidence (which may include lines quoted from the play).

Source: Anonymous, "'God of Vengeance' Players Convicted: Jury takes ninety minutes to find 13 guilty of presenting an immoral performance" (*The New York Times*, May 24, 1923), digitized by ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=9C05EFDB1730E333A25757C2A9639C946295D6CF>, accessed February 3, 2018.

5: Letter, Sholem Asch arguing in defense of his play, 1923.

This letter originally appeared in a pamphlet published in defense of the play in 1923 by *God of Vengeance*'s producer and lawyer Harry Weinberger, while the case against him and the performers, charged with presenting an "obscene and impure drama," was underway. The pamphlet was handed out to audiences attending *God of Vengeance* at the Apollo Theatre on West 42nd Street.

Suggested Activity: In small groups, discuss: how does Asch defend himself against the charges of writing an "immoral" play? What is his argument, and do you feel it is persuasive? What sort of "Jewish writer" does he *not* consider himself to be? How would you characterize his own relationship to Jewish characters and Jewish themes in his work, based on what you have read of *God of Vengeance* and on his own comments in this letter?

Source: Sholem Asch, "Open Letter by Sholom Asch, Author of 'The God of Vengeance,'" in pamphlet, "'The God of Vengeance': Is the Play Immoral? – Is it a Great Drama?," (New York City: Published by Harry Weinberger, ca. March or April 1923), re-published in David Mazower, "Sholem Asch: *God of Vengeance* is Not an Immoral Play," (Digital Yiddish Theatre Project, January 16, 2017), <www.yiddishstage.org/an-open-letter-by-sholom-asch-author-of-got-fun-nekome>, accessed February 3, 2018.

6: Recorded play excerpt, "Indecent," 2017.

Paula Vogel's Tony-nominated 2017 play *Indecent* tells the story of the ill-fated 1923 Broadway production of *God of Vengeance*. In this clip from *Indecent*, the actress who has been cast as Rifkele meets the actress who will play opposite her as Manke for the first time, and they discuss *God of Vengeance*.

Suggested Activity: Watch the video with students. Solicit comments from them about what stood out to them in the clip—a line that struck them as interesting or unexpected or false, a performance choice that surprised them or delighted them. Then, ask them to reflect on the following in writing: imagine that you are an actor in 1923 about to perform the role of Manke or Rifkele in *God of Vengeance*. What concerns, fears, or anticipated joys might be in your mind as you consider the role?

Source: Paula Vogel, *Indecent*, directed by Rebecca Taichman (New York: Cort Theatre, 2017), video by Playbill Video, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PMiZQgUgTss>>, accessed February 3, 2018.

7: Play preview video, "From 'God of Vengeance' to 'Indecent,'" 2017.

This video presents a joint interview with playwright Paula Vogel and director Rebecca Taichman (who won the Tony Award for Best Director in 2017 for her work on *Indecent*) about their collaboration to bring *Indecent* to Broadway. Comments from Edna Nahshon, Israeli scholar of Yiddish theatre, are also included, as well as scenes from rehearsals for the first New York performances of the play, at the Vineyard Theatre, an off-Broadway company where *Indecent* played before ending up at Broadway's Cort Theatre.

Suggested Activity: Discuss, in small groups: why do you think Vogel wanted to write a play about the trial surrounding *God of Vengeance*? Vogel states that "The play *God of Vengeance* and what happened to *God of Vengeance* is very pertinent to us in the 21st century in America." What does she mean by that? Do you agree with that statement? In what ways is *God of Vengeance*—and the story of its production—meaningful to you, and possibly to others, today?

Source: Rebecca Taichman and Paula Vogel, "From *God of Vengeance* to *Indecent*," interview (New York: The Museum of The City of New York and the Vineyard Theater, April 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQoJ_BkAFeg>, accessed February 3, 2018.