

Shlemiel Crooks by Anna Olswanger

A Discussion Guide

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The Pearlstone Institute for Living Judaism and the Center for Jewish Education of Baltimore are pleased to provide you with this discussion guide to ***Shlemiel Crooks*** by Anna Olswanger. Please take the time as a family or class to read the book together, discuss the topics, and engage in some of the activities.

Tips for parents and teachers:

This is a story about the Eastern European Jewish immigrant experience in mid-America in the early twentieth century. It provides a jumping off point for lively discussions about the immigrant experience, the Yiddish language, the settlement of Palestine under the British, the Exodus, the prophet Elijah, and the notion of community. We have selected three of these topics and provided some ideas:

1. Read the book by yourself first
2. Plan out how you are going to read together
 - Each family member or student read a page
 - Parent or teacher read with dramatic flair
 - Assignment of "parts" to family members or students
3. Decide when you are going to interrupt the reading with questions or explanations.

Things to Know, Discuss, and Do

Know: Yiddish

This story is written in a Yiddish voice. The author uses both actual Yiddish words and English translations of Yiddish phrases. Yiddish was the "mother tongue" of millions of Ashkenazic Jews who resided in Europe and Russia. It arose (c.1100) out of a blend of a number of German dialects in the ghettos of Central Europe, and from there it spread to other parts of the world. Phonetically, Yiddish is closer to Middle High German than is modern German. Its vocabulary is basically German, but it has been enlarged by borrowings from Hebrew, Slavic, Romance languages, and English. It is a very colorful and colloquial language and when translated into English is often very humorous.

Here are some examples of Yiddish in the book:

<i>Gevalt</i>	a cry for help
<i>Gonif</i>	thief, crook
<i>Mish-mosh</i>	hodgepodge, mixture of unrelated things
<i>Shlemiel</i>	fool, clumsy person
<i>Shtuss</i>	foolishness
<i>Tummel</i>	noise, racket

Here are some examples of translations from Yiddish in the book:

Rattling his teakettle (means a long-winded conversation)
 May a trolley grow in their stomachs (one of the many funny
 Yiddish curses in the book)

Discuss

1. Do you know anyone in your family who speaks Yiddish?
2. What Yiddish words does your family use--*Bubbe, Zaidye, Chanukah gelt?*
3. Not all Jews spoke Yiddish; other first languages were Ladino and Arabic. Do you have family members who speak these languages?

Do

1. Create new funny "Yiddish" phrases.
2. Make a plan to learn one new Yiddish word a week.
3. Find family documents written in Yiddish that you can show and discuss.

Know: Immigration

In 1880 the Jewish population of the United States was about 250,000. Over the next forty years more than two million eastern European Jews, about one-third of the entire Jewish population there, immigrated to the United States. Resettlement agencies encouraged the immigrants to leave the crowded port cities of New York and Baltimore and relocate in the midwest and southern parts of the country. There are many stories of Jewish immigrant life on the Great Plains, in the Deep South, and in the gold and silver mines of the West.

Discuss

1. Who immigrated to America in your family?
2. Where did they live?
3. What was their occupation?

Do

1. Ask family members about stories when they were young or when

- they had to move to a new location.
2. Write a fact-based tale about an incident that happened to your family.
 3. Start tracing your family tree. A good place to start is on the internet at jewishgen.org or JGL, Jewish Genealogy Links.

Know: Elijah

Eliyahu Ha-Navi ("Elijah The Prophet" in English) was a biblical prophet who lived in the 9th century B.C.E. in the Kingdom of Israel during the reign of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. His prophetic fervor and fierce defense of G-d in the face of pagan influences in comparison with all other Hebrew biblical prophets earned him the honor of being the 'guardian angel' of the Hebrews and subsequently, the Jewish people. Because he was considered the strongest defender of G-d, he was said to be the forerunner of the Messiah. The Book of Malachi, the last of the Hebrew prophets, states that Elijah will reappear just before the coming of the Messianic Age (Malachi 3:1). Jewish legends recall the mystical appearance of Elijah the Prophet in times of trouble, to promise relief and redemption, to lift downcast spirits, and to plant hope in the hearts of the downtrodden.

Discuss

1. Why did the author include the Prophet Elijah in this story about Pesach wine?
2. Share some funny or special stories or tales about opening the door for Eliyahu during the Seder.

Do

1. Sing the song "Eliyahu HaNavi."
2. There are many books of tales and legends of Elijah. Check them out of the library and read them together, and even act them out.

- *Journeys with Elijah: Eight Tales of the Prophet* by Barbara Diamond Goldin
- *The Mysterious Visitor: Stories of the Prophet Elijah* by Nina Jaffe

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