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2023

# HIGH HOLIDAY MEDIA GUIDE

exploring  
judaism

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ANALOG POLAROID




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# credits

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## exploringjudaism

ExploringJudasim.org is a project of The United Synagogue  
of Conservative Judaism and The Rabbinical Assembly



# Introduction & Rationale

As we approach the High Holidays with awe and anticipation, some excitement and maybe some dread, it is natural that we seek inspiration. Historically that has come in the form of Penitential Prayers - Selihot.

Beginning on Saturday night, September 9th, we enter the period of Selihot. These prayers are traditionally said around midnight, a time of Divine Kindness, each weeknight until Yom Kippur. The words are old and beautiful, but can be hard for some people to connect to. The ideas are timeless and valuable.

Selihot are meant to awaken God to mercy and to awaken each of us to the impending days of judgment. But sometimes, that awakening can feel like getting up in the middle of the night, discovering that the power is out, and stubbing your toe on the way to getting a glass of water: we know the goal, but the environment is not set up for success, and the power/liturgy is out of our control. While we hop around on the uninjured foot, we find that we are frustrated and may even give up on the goal.

At Exploring Judaism, we decided that using a contemporary medium - film - can help make opening the gates of repentance more accessible. And, while Selihot are typically recited in a community environment without discussion or introspection, we decided to add some thought-provoking questions.

The High Holiday Movie Guide by Exploring Judaism is just the first installment in a project that we intend to keep building and growing. This first unit focuses on the upcoming High Holidays, but future additions will consider other topics, including holidays like Passover and Hanukkah, as well as larger philosophical concepts. All this and more will be added to this document on our website.

These movies are meant to engage people in a group experience followed by a conversation. We have chosen to include only one Jewish text - in English - with each film, and 3-5 questions for contemplation and discussion.

## HOW & WHERE TO USE THE GUIDE:

Choosing a film and a conversation: This guide is packed with data; on each page you will find:

### IMDB LINK:

get more information before settling in to watch

### STYLE:

live action, animated, etc.

Recommended age group based on Common Sense Media so you can filter for your group

### COMMON SENSE MEDIA GUIDE:

a link with an explanation of their ratings

### WHERE TO WATCH:

all films are available on streaming platforms, with one exception which is still in theaters

### EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS

#### OVERARCHING THEME:

broad concepts that are explored in the movie

#### CONTENT WARNING:

Some subjects may be sensitive for some viewers. Please check the content warning and the IMDb/ Common Sense Media Guide.

### THE PREMISE:

a brief summary

### THEMES:

highlighted ideas from the movie

### THINKING JEWISHLY:

connections to Jewish thought and the upcoming holidays

### TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:

a Jewish text parallel and lead-in to the conversation

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

designed to spark deep thought and sharing. Not every question is for every conversation, and we encourage you to add your own!

### WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:

a little nugget or trivia

After you watch the film, open up the questions for discussion. Use these at home with family, at your synagogue, in a Hebrew School class, or in a journal.

We hope that you enjoy the movies as much as we enjoyed the process of creating this guide.

With blessings for a Shanah Tovah u'Metukah,  
a Happy and Sweet New Year,

Rabbi Mordechai Rackover

Editor in Chief of Exploring Judaism

Director of Publications and Digital Engagement,  
The Rabbinical Assembly

### FINAL CUT SCENE:

If you find any errors or want to send us feedback please reach out - [admin@exploringjudaism.org](mailto:admin@exploringjudaism.org)

# Puss in Boots: The Last Wish



**Recommended** for ages 8+

**Common Sense Media Guide**

[Click here](#)

**Animated**

**Where to watch:** Netflix

**Overarching theme**

Life and Death

**Content warning**

Death

**IMDB link** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS Life and Death

**THE PREMISE:** The fearless rogue, Puss in Boots, realizes that he may not be as invincible as he hoped when the cat learns that he has used up eight of his nine lives. In a race to find the Wishing Star, a magical object with immense power that Puss can use to restore expired lives, he is joined by his ex-fiancée Kitty Softpaws, and Perrito, a dog pretending to be a cat. Big Jack Horner, the evil pastry salesman, also seeks the Wishing Star to use for the nefarious goal of controlling all the magic in the world.

**THEMES:** When Puss in Boots first appears and declares himself, in song, “your favorite fearless hero,” it is clear that he has never really contemplated responsibility for his actions. Being forced to reflect on his experiences and how little he has cared about consequences helps Puss grow into a more rounded and caring individual.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** During the High Holidays, we ask, “Who shall live and who shall die?” We also review the many ways people might perish. How can we take stock of our lives, making each moment count, and consider the good fortune we have to be inscribed for another year of life?

**TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:** In [Pirkei Avot 2:10](#), Rabbi Eliezer shares: “...repent one day before your death.” People aren’t animated cats—we have only one life. Rabbi Eliezer’s teaching challenges us since none of us know when we may die: When should we repent?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How can being more aware of the precious nature of life make us better people?
2. If you could wish for anything and anyone, what and who would you wish for?
3. Puss in Boots seeks to use the power of a wish to change his life:
  - a. Are wishes and prayers the same thing?
  - b. If you had a day to focus on prayer, what and who would you pray for?
4. With Rabbi Eliezer in mind:
  - a. What “loose ends” would you like to tie up in your life?
  - b. Who are the people you want to check in with, and what conversations would you like to have with them?

**WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:** This version of Puss in Boots first appeared in Shrek 2 as comic relief. The story goes back to Renaissance France and Italy, where the ‘booted cat’ is portrayed in [fairy tales](#) as a deceiver.

Vivo

exploring  
judaism



**Recommended** for ages 6+

**Common Sense Media Guide**  
[Click here](#)

**Animated**

**Where to Watch:** Netflix

**Overarching theme:** Joy

**IMDB link** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS

### Individuality, uniqueness, helping others

**THE PREMISE:** Vivo is a [kinkajou](#) (a rainforest honey bear) who delights Havana locals and tourists with his musical talents and enjoys a warm bond with his owner, the elderly Andrés. The chance for Andrés to reunite with a famous singer at her farewell concert in Miami compels Vivo to make the treacherous journey in the suitcase of Andrés' grand-niece, Gabi.

**THEMES:** Getting out of one's comfort zone is difficult, especially for those happy with their lives. Selflessness and courage are required to face new experiences and the adversity of a life-changing journey. Gabi is a free spirit who "dances to the beat of her own drum," she shows us that keeping our sense of individuality in the face of challenges is critical to being healthy and happy.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** One way to face life's challenges is to start our day with gratitude, recognizing the great gifts we receive. Each morning, we thank God for making us in the Divine image and enabling us to be individuals. The notion of being created B'tzelem Elohim—in the image of God—invites us to celebrate our diversity and acknowledge the specific strengths and contributions we bring to the world.

#### TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:

In the Talmud, [Sanhedrin 38a](#), we learn:

"The Sages taught: The fact that Adam, the first person, was created alone serves to declare the greatness of the supreme Ruler of all rulers, the Blessed Holy One, as a person stamps several coins with one seal, and they are all similar to each other. But the Blessed Holy One stamps all people with the seal of Adam the first human, and not one of them is identical to another."

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What qualities make us unique, and how do we share them?
2. What does it mean to be created in the image of God?
3. How can we approach those who are different with curiosity and appreciation?
4. Are you amazing at something? What is it?
5. If each of us is unique, what obligation does that place on us as a collective?

**WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:** Vivo is voiced by Lin-Manuel Miranda, who also wrote the songs. Parents can enjoy creative and entertaining lyrics and beats from the man behind Hamilton in a family-friendly setting.





**Recommended for ages** 8+

**Common Sense Media Guide**

[Click here](#)

**Animated**

**Where to Watch:** Disney+

**Overarching theme:**  
Forgiveness

**Content Warning:**  
Parental loss

**IMDB link** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS

Reconnection, family dynamics,  
new perspectives, environmentalism

**THE PREMISE:** Searcher, a member of a family of explorers, finds that his spirit of exploration has faded since his father, Jaeger Clade, disappeared. Jaeger helped discover a power source, a plant named [Pando](#). When its power begins to wane, Searcher has no choice but to board an airship into a mysterious sinkhole to find a new way to power their planet, unaware that he will encounter unexpected things and pieces of his past.

**THEMES:** Fear and uncertainty can overwhelm us, and it can be hard to confront something that we don't understand. We may not fully grasp the reasons behind something, like Jaeger's disappearance, but we can approach situations with forgiveness and a willingness to listen and learn.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** Forgiveness is a vital theme of the High Holidays, and accepting what you can't control is part of that. Navigating complicated relationships sometimes requires distance and reflection. Forgiveness of past misdeeds can lead to a renewed positive connection for both people in the relationship.

### TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:

Each and every night, our siddur encourages us to recite this as part of the [Bedtime Shema](#), inviting us to let go of each day and start the next one fresh:

"I hereby forgive anyone who has angered me, or sinned against me, either physically or with money, against my honor or anything that is mine, whether accidentally or intentionally, inadvertently or deliberately, by speech or by deed, by thought or by speculation, in this incarnation or any other...may no one be punished on my account..."

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How do we move forward when we have upset someone, or someone has upset us?
2. Ideally, when we seek forgiveness, we receive it. What can you do when you are not forgiven?
3. How do you feel when you are forgiven?

**WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:** A talented voice cast in this animated adventure includes Jake Gyllenhaal, Gabrielle Union, and Dennis Quaid. The film also includes dazzling imagery and a wondrous, creative look at a different universe.



# Rosaline



**Recommended** for Ages 13+

**Common Sense Media Guide**  
[Click here](#)

**Live Action**

**Where to watch:** Hulu

**Overarching theme:**  
Self-reflection and growth

**Content Warning:**  
Sexual content and language,  
closeting, suicide

**IMDB link** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS Jealousy, Revenge

**THE PREMISE:** The story of Romeo and Juliet has been told countless times. This new iteration is from the perspective of Rosaline, whose secret romance with Romeo is disrupted by the arrival of her cousin, Juliet. Furious at being abandoned for someone else, Rosaline sets out to sabotage the new couple.

**THEMES:** It can be hurtful to be pushed aside or ignored. It can make us doubt our self-worth and lead us to focus on what others possess or relationships. Trying to live our lives is more important than attempting to live someone else's.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** The Torah tells us in the Ten Commandments not to covet or be jealous of what others have. We might desire something, but acting to take the object of our desire is inappropriate. We can suffer when we are jealous of others and behave with pettiness and vindictiveness.

**TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:** Jealousy, envy, covetousness, and desire are just a few words for a fundamental human emotion we all share. The Torah mentions jealousy as a psychological transgression. You don't have to act on the jealousy for it to be problematic.

This is what the sages said: ([Pirkei Avot 4:21](#))

"Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar said: envy, lust, and [the desire for] honor put a person out of the world."

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is something we can do to focus on what we have instead of what others have?
2. How might we make choices to guide us toward better outcomes when feeling hurt?
3. How does looking at a familiar story through a different lens change our understanding of all its players and overall message?
4. It can be disappointing and upsetting to hear "no." How might we respond without disrespecting someone else's choices?
5. What is Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar's intention here? Does he really mean that if we are jealous—POOF! - we disappear?

# A Man Called Otto



**Recommended** for Ages 13+

**Common Sense Media Guide**  
[Click here](#)

**Live Action**

**Where to watch** Netflix

**Overarching theme:**  
Life and Death

**Content warning:**  
Suicide, spousal death

**IMDB link** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS

### Connection, acceptance, saying goodbye

**THE PREMISE:** The curmudgeonly widower Otto is so unhappy that he is ready to end his life. He makes multiple unsuccessful attempts at suicide that are punctuated by periods where he helps his neighbors. Determined not to let any sunshine into his life following the passing of his wife, Otto soon learns that he has little choice in the matter when his bubbly neighbor Marisol refuses to allow herself to be ignored.

**THEMES:** Grief is a powerful and transformative experience. It can cast a shadow on everything in our life. Those who have not had similar experiences may not understand the grief-stricken person's desire to be left alone. Those untouched by grief may also offer fresh perspectives that remind mourners of what brings them happiness even while they grieve. We may generate forward movement by remembering and letting positive memories comfort us as we try to return to some sense of normalcy.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** Honoring and remembering those who have died is important in Judaism. Through the daily recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish and the annual recitation upon a yahrtzeit (anniversary of a death), we keep people who have passed on in our lives through memory. On Yom Kippur, when we ask God to seal us in the Book of Life so that we don't fade into the realm of memory, we are making the case that we have more to experience in this life, which can help us focus on our life goals and purpose.

**TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:** Siddurim, prayerbooks, are filled with precious gems collected over generations and are now a part of the daily lives of Jews around the globe.

One amazing piece, the [Six Remembrances](#), sometimes recited by individuals at the end of the services, lists six events or ideas that the Torah urges us to remember daily.

1. The Exodus from Egypt ([Deuteronomy 16:3](#))
2. The Revelation at Mount Sinai ([Deuteronomy 4:9-10](#))
3. The Attack by Amalek ([Deuteronomy 25:17-19](#))
4. The Sin of the Golden Calf ([Deuteronomy 9:7](#))
5. What Happened to Miriam ([Deuteronomy 14:9](#))
6. Shabbat ([Exodus 20:8](#))

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### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The Torah commands that we remember—why does it command us to remember these Six Remembrances? Can you come up with a theory? Can you come up with six events or ideas that you or your family would like to remember daily?
2. In the Tradition, we draw on communal and personal memory to inspire and connect us to each other. Can you think of a time when you have shared a memory with friends or family even if you did not experience the original event?
3. What might it look like to accept grief and move forward without forgetting?
4. How can we express empathy and understanding to those who have experienced something we have not?
5. How can we help and encourage the people we love to open up to those who care about them?
6. How might we find a renewed sense of purpose when our lives have dramatically changed?

**WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:** A Man Called Otto is an American remake of the Swedish film A Man Called Ove (2015), based on the 2012 novel by Fredrik Backman.



## Dear Evan Hansen



**Recommended** for Ages 13+

**Common Sense Media Guide:**

[Click here](#)

**Live Action**

**Where to watch:** Max

**Overarching Theme:**

Self-reflection and growth

**Content warning:** Suicide

**IMDB link:** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS

### Accountability, Friendship

**THE PREMISE:** Teenager Evan Hansen struggles to fit in with his peers. Following a classmate's suicide, Evan pretends they were close and begins a large-scale tribute project that gives him unprecedented visibility. As he begins a relationship with the late teenager's sister, his lie begins to unravel.

**THEMES:** One lie can quickly spiral out of control. When people become attached to a particular idea, it can have unintended consequences. Giving people hope and a sense of purpose can ultimately be harmful if the basis for hope is a lie.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** What happens when two mitzvot come into conflict? On one hand, the Ten Commandments tell us not to lie; on the other hand, saving a life is akin to saving the entire world. Evan's tribute can make others feel seen, so what is right?

**TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:** There is a Jewish folktale about the risks of telling tales or lying:

Shiloh, a member of a small community, is called to meet with the rabbi.

The rabbi explains, "I have heard rumors about Eli, and the rumors have even reached Eli! Eli is very distraught."

Shiloh, the rumor-monger, begins to deny any responsibility for the situation. The rabbi persists, cutting Shiloh off and saying, "I did a little investigation, and three people have said that you are the source of the rumor."

Once again, Shiloh denies responsibility.

The rabbi clicks their tongue and says, "Well, Eli no longer wants to come to synagogue and is even ashamed to go out in the street. Eli is considering moving away from our town."

The rumor-monger begins to squirm. The rabbi looks into their eyes and waits.

Finally, after a full two minutes of silence, an exclamation, Shiloh says, "Okay, okay, it was me; I did tell other people that story. But I was just doing it to protect them. And it's not my fault that they shared it all over, and now Eli is so upset."



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The rabbi continued to sit in silence.

Shiloh again exclaims, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to cause Eli harm or get them to move. Is there anything I can do to make it up?"

The rabbi again spoke, "You do seem to be remorseful. Here is what I want you to do. Take a feather pillow and go to a meadow. Cut open the pillow and shake it."

"But rabbi, what? Why?"

"Hush, if you are sincerely remorseful, do what I have told you and come back the next day with the pillow restuffed with the original feathers."

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:** People refer to a "white lie" as permitted because it is intended to make people feel better. Is there any situation in which lying is okay?

How can we stop something from spiraling out of control if we realize we have made a mistake?

In the folktale, the feathers cannot be returned. What do you think happened the next day? What lesson was the rabbi trying to teach?

What else you should know: Camp Ramah alum Ben Platt reprises his Tony-winning role from the Broadway show of the same name, which won Best Musical in 2017.



# Not Okay



**Recommended** for Ages 15+

**Common Sense Media Guide**

[Click here](#)

**Live Action**

**Where to watch**

Hulu

**Overarching Theme:**

Self-reflection and growth

**Content warning:**

Terrorist attack

**IMDB link** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS

### Social media, accountability, ownership

**THE PREMISE:** Danni wants to seem cooler and busier than she is. When she pretends to travel to Paris for a writers' retreat, she is identified incorrectly as a survivor of a terrorist attack when she hadn't even been in France. Danni is enticed by the online notoriety she has garnered and milks as much as possible out of her fabrication until it begins to catch up with her.

**THEMES:** When we assume identities and experiences that aren't ours, we diminish the authenticity of the experience for those who lived it. Stealing attention away from a cause is a disservice and will not end well once the truth is revealed.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** Honesty and a sense of self are keys to a rich experience of Judaism. Arik Einstein's song Ani v'Ata declares, "You and I will change the world." We can support others by being good friends and allies while advocating for what is important to them rather than co-opting their experiences.

#### TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:

Ani v'ata lyrics

You and I we'll change the world  
you and I by then all will follow  
Others have said it before me but  
doesn't matter you  
and I we'll change the world.

For Hebrew Lyrics: [Click here](#)

For Video & Audio: [Click here](#)

You and I we'll try  
from the beginning  
it will be tough for us, no matter,  
it's not too bad!  
Others have said it before me  
but it doesn't matter you  
and I we'll change the world.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why do we sometimes pretend to be something we are not, and what can this behavior tell us about ourselves?
2. How can we be allies for those who have been through difficult experiences without hogging the spotlight for ourselves?
3. How can we repair the damage we have done when we hurt others?

**WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:** This is the second film from writer-director Quinn Shephard, whose first film, Blame, examines other interesting issues about sexuality and accountability.



# Marcel the Shell with Shoes On

Marcel  
The Shell With Shoes On



**Recommended** for Ages 15+

**Common Sense Media Guide**

[Click here](#)

**Live Action/Stop Motion**

**Where to Watch:**

Paramount+

**Overarching theme:** Joy

**IMDB link** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS

### Understanding reality, reconnection

**THE PREMISE:** A talking shell named Marcel explores the world around him, telling audiences about the house he lives in with his grandmother and others. Marcel slowly learns about the wide world as he tries to find his missing family.

**THEMES:** Innocence and curiosity offer a wondrous window through which we might view the world. What might it be like if our understanding was only rooted in what we could see?

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** Learning is a vital way of engaging in Judaism. Jewish holidays allow us to return to familiar texts and repeat the traditions we practice every year. A thirst for knowledge is crucial to becoming a better person, and the notion that there is something new to learn is both challenging and rewarding. An open mind is a powerful tool to deepen understanding, even if we have seen the material before.

**TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:** Judaism has an interesting relationship to physical objects—we insist that God is not material and, at the same time, insist that some objects, a Torah, for example, are filled with holiness.

On Friday nights, we recite kiddush over wine before we say Hamotzi over bread. At the same time, the rabbis taught that bread is the central element of any meal. The [Tur](#), a code of Jewish law from the 14th century, teaches that we cover the Challah during kiddush on Friday nights so that it won't be embarrassed because it had to wait until after kiddush. Does the challah actually have feelings?

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How might we recognize what we don't understand about the world, and how can we seek to educate ourselves?
2. What have you experienced that changed your worldview?
3. How can watching typically inanimate objects talk on screen open our minds to new possibilities?
4. Activity for younger children: Interview them as they pretend to be ritual objects that they are familiar with. What would a siddur say? The Shabbat candles? The synagogue?

**WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:** Marcel the Shell, voiced and created by Jenny Slate, first appeared in a series of short films released in 2010.

# The Bad Guys



**Recommended** for Ages 6+

**Common Sense Media Guide**

[Click here](#)

**Animated**

**Where to watch**

Netflix/Peacock

**Overarching theme:**

Self-reflection and growth

**IMDB link** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS Redemption

**THE PREMISE:** Wolf has long orchestrated elaborate heists with his criminal gang. When a politician calls him out, he gets arrested and later attempts to reform his gang. After a while, he starts to think that he may not be the bad guy he was always supposed to be.

**THEMES:** We cannot help but be affected by what other people think of us. Learning that someone sees us differently than we see ourselves invites us to stop and reflect. Seeing ourselves in new ways can change our worldview and make us consider who we are. It may require work to acknowledge how we intentionally or unintentionally hurt others.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** The High Holiday liturgy stresses the importance of repentance as a spiritual practice. To repent, we are required to acknowledge that we have done wrong. When seeking to atone, we pray for forgiveness and, crucially, speak directly to those we hurt. This process requires a great deal of humility and a willingness to hear how you have affected them.

**TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:** Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg writes in her book [On Repentance and Repair](#),

“Owning up to the hurt that you have caused someone is difficult. And how much more so when an injury was not accidental, when you must admit that you knowingly lied to a loved one, let down someone in need, unfairly lashed out in anger, chose to be complicit in abuse, violated boundaries, or took other actions with real, painful implications.

Owning the fact that we’ve done wrong is challenging—even threatening or scary—but it is the work we are obligated to do. Maimonides is very clear about what that work is meant to look like—and his clarity can help guide us.”

She outlines the five steps based on Maimonides’ framework:

1. Naming and Owning Harm
2. Starting to Change
3. Restitution and Accepting Consequences
4. Apology
5. Making Different Choices

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**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Before apologizing to someone, we have to recognize that we've done something to hurt or harm them. Why is this so hard?
2. We are always in relationships with others. How does the perspective of others impact our sense of self?
3. Sometimes, talking to someone with a different perspective can change our understanding of our actions. Can you describe a time this happened and your new understanding as a result?

**WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:** The Bad Guys is based on the popular book series of the same name by Aaron Blabey.



# Abominable



**Recommended** for Ages 8+

**Common Sense Media Guide**

[Click here](#)

**Animated**

**Overarching theme:** Joy

**Content warning:**

Parental loss

**Where to watch:** Peacock

**IMDB link** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS

### Imagination, travel, adventure

**THE PREMISE:** Yi works to save money for a trip across China. She had planned to take the “trip of a lifetime” with her father before he passed away. When Yi encounters a yeti on her roof, she realizes he isn’t the terrifying abominable snowman everyone thinks he is and sets out to help him return home.

Themes: Finding others who feel similarly can generate unique connections when people feel separate and isolated. Shared experience allows them to forge friendships. People can feel included through our actions when we take the time to see someone for who they are. Connections are much more profound when we engage people directly instead of making assumptions about them.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** The Tradition has many stories of travel and journeys. When we meet new people and places, we can choose our approach: Do I remain open-minded, or do I close myself off by making assumptions based on first impressions?

**TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:** It is taught in [Pirkei Avot 2:4](#) that we should strive to stay connected with others and avoid judging them if we haven’t had the same experience:

“Hillel said: do not separate yourself from the community, do not trust in yourself until the day of your death, do not judge your fellow person until you have reached their place. Do not say something that cannot be understood [trusting] that in the end it will be understood...”

Rabbi Tamar Elad-Appelbaum writes, “This suggests that we should always make an effort to be understood by others, translating our inner thoughts into outward expressions so that they can be comprehensible to others...and likewise, we should intentionally direct ourselves outward to wards encounters with others.”

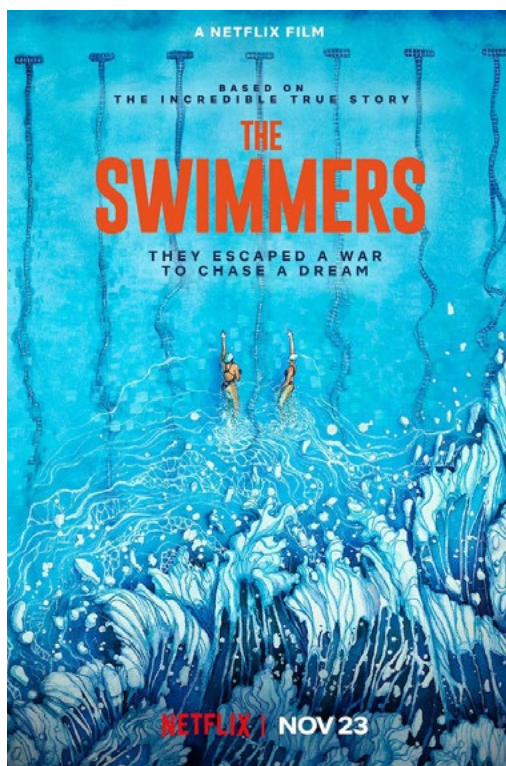
#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Describe when you met someone, made an assumption, and were totally wrong.
2. What we wear, how we act, and what we say all provide a first impression. How do you present yourself?
3. What are three ways you can improve your connections with others?

**WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:** Chloe Bennet (Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.) provides the voice of Fei Fei in a voice cast that includes Sarah Paulson and Eddie Izzard.



# The Swimmers



**Recommended** for Ages 14+

**Common Sense Media Guide:**

[Click here](#)

**Live Action**

**Where to watch:** Netflix

**Overarching theme:**

Self-reflection and growth,  
exile

**Content warning:**

War, perilous sea crossing

**IMDB link:** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS

### Self-reflection & growth

**THE PREMISE:** Yusra and Sara Mardini have been training vigorously for years to swim in the Olympics, but the war in their homeland, Syria, forces them to leave and make a dangerous trip to a new place where they risk having to start all over.

**THEMES:** When we work to accomplish something and then aren't able to finish because of circumstances out of our control, it can be hard to keep going. Yet, we can apply the strength within us to unexpected situations. We may not be able to see the end or even the goal, but having the determination to keep moving forward can allow us to do extraordinary things.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** The Jewish people have suffered greatly throughout history and have experienced extraordinary ordeals. It can be difficult to maintain faith in difficult times. For some, God's support can make us feel better. For others, it is the idea that God has a plan. Regardless, the determination to keep moving forward and never give up is something Jews have always done.

**TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:** At the end of every tractate of Talmud, it is customary to recite a [hadran](#), a conclusionary text. However, as you will notice, every ending is a wish to return anew.

"We will return to you, Tractate \_\_\_\_, and you will return to us; our mind is on you, Tractate \_\_\_\_, and your mind is on us; we will not forget you, Tractate \_\_\_\_, and you will not forget us – not in this world and not in the next world.

May it be your will, Lord, my God, just as You have helped me to complete tractate \_\_\_\_, so too may you help me to start other tractates and books, and to complete them, to learn and to teach, to observe and to enact and to fulfill all the words of the teaching of your Torah with love."

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What moment in your life that seemed like an ending was a new beginning?
2. What would it be like to lose everything we take for granted, and how would we begin to start over?
3. What skills would we be able to employ if we needed to leave everything behind and go somewhere far away?
4. What matters most to us that would remain important and motivating even in new circumstances?

**WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:** This film is based on a true story. Yusra and Sara are portrayed by real-life sisters Nathalie and Manal Issa.



**Recommended** for Ages 13+

**Common Sense Media Guide**

[Click here](#)

**Live Action**

**Where to watch:** Hulu

**Overarching theme:** Joy

**IMDB link:** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS

### Disabilities, Musical

**THE PREMISE:** Sage and Tony's magical meeting at dance camp seems like it will be just a fleeting summer memory until Sage and her mother end up moving to the same small town where Tony—who claimed to go to a boarding school in the city—lives.

**THEMES:** Featuring many people with disabilities in the cast and crew highlights that everyone has something to contribute. Differences don't need to create divisions or be criticized but can be championed as something unique and beneficial. The major themes of the film echo musicals about summer love, such as "Grease" and "Footloose," but the overarching experience of the film imbues the audience with joy.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** Song, dance, and simcha (joy) are fundamental parts of our tradition that are sometimes forgotten during the intensity of the High Holidays. This is why the Tradition calls Sukkot, zman simchateinu, the time of our joy to remind us to stop and enjoy life.

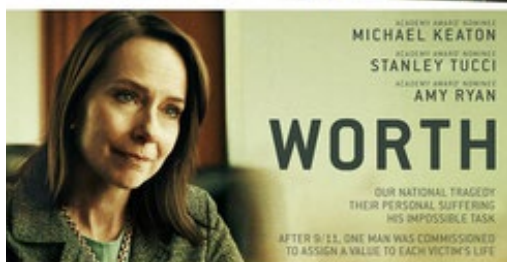
**TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:** Rebbi Nachman of Breslov writes in [Likutei Moharan](#), "It is a great mitzvah to always be happy, and to make every effort to determinedly keep depression and gloom at bay."

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Rabbi Nachman, said that being happy is a great mitzvah. He also tells us to leave behind sadness. What emotions would you abandon forever if you could?
2. How do you bring joy into your Jewish practice?
3. How can we experience people for who they are and not just what they look like?
4. What is something that we take for granted daily?
5. What is a hidden talent you have that you would love to share with other people?

**WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:** In Variety, they write, "In fact, it's the first musical to star people with disabilities and the first SAG-registered [Screen Actors Guild] movie in which more than half the cast and crew are disabled."





**Recommended** for Ages 15+

**Common Sense Media Guide:**

[Click here](#)

**Live Action**

**Where to watch:** Hulu

**Overarching theme:**

Life and Death

**Content warning:**

Terrorism, death

**IMDB link** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS

### Loss, Value

**THE PREMISE:** In the wake of the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, attorney Kenneth Feinberg is hired to do what he does best: Place a monetary value on the lives of those who died to determine insurance payouts to their families.

**THEMES:** It's difficult to put a dollar value on someone's potential, and it's impossible to know what someone may have accomplished if given the time and opportunity, especially when tragic circumstances are involved. Separating emotion from mathematical facts can feel heartless and add to suffering.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** It is impossible to truly evaluate the life of another. In the Talmud, there is a framework for measuring the damage another has suffered, but this is always insufficient. This is because our lives are invaluable. Thinking to "what could have been" and the unknown potential of each person and the impact they could make on the world.

**TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:** Cain's murder of Abel is the first killing in the Torah. When God confronts Cain, God says that Abel's bloods call out from the ground. Rashi interprets this and explains,

"The bloods: [This refers] to his blood and the blood of all of his descendants."

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How can we measure our own accomplishments, and what among them matters most?
2. What other situations do we need to take a direct approach that doesn't always feel comfortable or nice?
3. What does the word "value" mean, and is money the only valuable thing?

# Barbie



**Recommended** for Ages 11+

**Common Sense Media Guide:**  
[Click here](#)

**Live Action**

**Where to watch:**  
Theaters

**Overarching theme:**  
Self-reflection and growth

**Content warning:** Sexuality

**IMDB link:** [Click here](#)

## EXPLORING JUDAISM'S WATCH WORDS Equality, individuality, acceptance

**THE PREMISE:** When Barbie suddenly starts thinking about real-world concepts, she decides to leave Barbieland to understand what is causing her to change in the real world. Ken comes along for the ride and discovers how different things are in a world run by men.

**THEMES:** Barbie's voyage of discovery runs into challenges when she confronts Ken's adoption of patriarchy. Entrenched values and gender roles can have a very negative impact on all of us. Having checks on power in place and a vision of equality can significantly improve society and allow everyone to be represented and have a voice.

**THINKING JEWISHLY:** Jewish tradition can seem monolithic and ancient in a bad way. But in the past century, we have seen a rebirth of innovative traditions of interpretation and expression. This has opened the Tradition to more perspectives and experiences that have changed the practice of Judaism for millions. This tradition of adaptation and change goes all the way back to Moses and the daughters of Tzelophchad when he asked God for guidance on situations that challenged him as he led Israel through the desert.

**TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS:** It says in the Talmud on [Bava Batra 119b](#) about the gifts and talents of the daughters of Tzelophchad:

"The rabbis taught: The daughters of Tzelophchad are wise, they are interpreters [of Torah], and they are righteous. That they are wise is because they spoke in accordance with the moment."

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What changes to Jewish practice and thought have you witnessed in your life? Have these been positive or negative? Is there a tradition that you wish would come back?
2. Barbie and Ken disregard each other's feelings, ultimately creating a culture that undervalues everyone's contributions. What can we do to help raise each other's voices to improve society?
4. High holidays are a time when we go back to tunes that we may have heard as children. What do those tunes do for you? How do they affect you?

**WHAT ELSE YOU SHOULD KNOW:** Barbie is the first film from a solo female director (Greta Gerwig) to make over \$1 billion at the box office.

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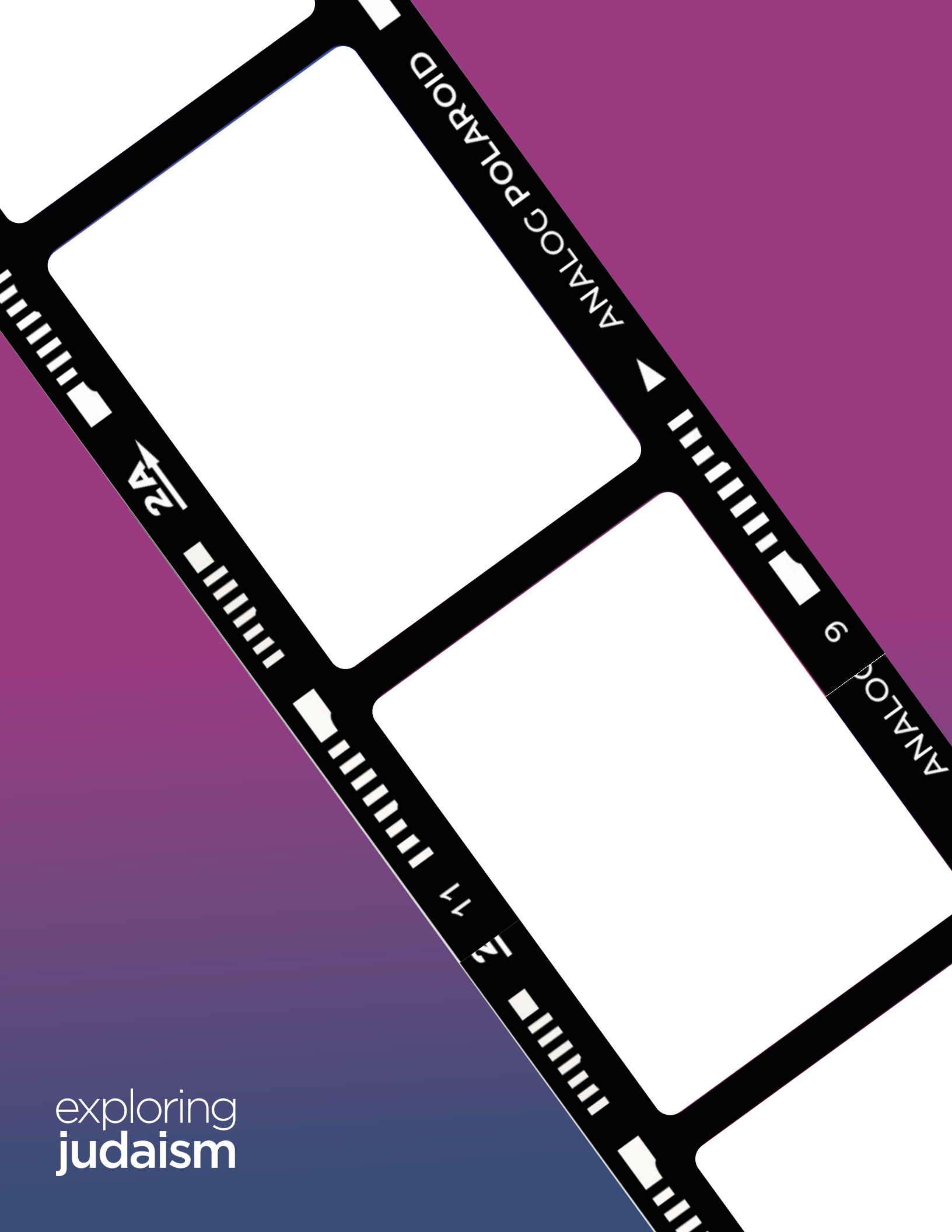
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Dear Evan Hansen  
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Worth

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Not Okay



exploring  
**judaism**