



Centropa Lesson

for the High Holidays

The Power of a Promise

Reflecting about who we are and how we behave are central to the High Holiday experience. Beginning with Elul and running through Simchat Torah, Jews ask forgiveness for our sins and shortcomings. For sins against people we must ask people for forgiveness (*ben adam lechavero*), for sins against God we must address God (*ben adam lemaqom*).

In this lesson students will study what it means to make and keep a promise. What do our promises – to ourselves, to each other, to God – mean if we don’t keep them? Do promises mean nothing or do promises mean everything?

This question lies at the heart of our soul searching during the High Holiday season and is also central to the story in Centropa’s film *Three Promises*, about a Sephardic family in the direst of circumstances and the promises that saved their lives. Matilda and Breda Kalef tell the story of how their parents fell in love, and raised them in an extended Sephardic family until they all faced the Nazi terror in March 1941. Their mother promised her husband to protect their girls – and she did; Father Tumpej, a Catholic priest, promised their mother to save the sisters – and he did; and Breda, years later, made a promise to herself to acknowledge Father Tumpej’s selflessness through Yad Vashem’s Righteous Among the Nations Award. She kept that promise, though Father Tumpej had since died.

This story of the three promises models for students what it means to be true to yourself and follow your ethics, no matter the consequences. When people were being slaughtered, and bad people were deciding, “who shall live and who shall die?” Father Tumpej was true to himself and followed his ethics to protect the Kalef girls.

Designed for grades 7-12. **One scene shows a picture of a gas van and refers to the fact that sick and disabled people were gassed in vans. Though most Centropa films neither specifically refer to nor describe the horrors of the Holocaust, we strongly recommend that teachers always view films before showing to students.**

This lesson runs one hour and can be adapted for shorter or longer classes.

Explore the power of promises with your students as they begin a new year.

How did this lesson work for you? We’d love to know! Email Centropa’s US Education Director with comments or questions: Lauren Granite, granite@centropa.org.

Enduring Understandings

- Reflecting on how we make and keep promises is an integral part of the spiritual experience of the High Holy Days.
- Jewish tradition distinguishes between promises made to God and promises made to humans.

Vocabulary:

- neder/nedarim – vow/vows
- vow = promise
- annul = cancel
- void = cancel

Overview of Lesson

Activity	Supplies Needed	Time
Part I: Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students list promises they have made in the past year• Discuss	Paper, pen, white board or chalk board	15 minutes
Part II: Three Promises <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Watch Centropa film• Discuss	“Three Promises” film (see below for link), computer, screen, audio/speakers	30 minutes
Part III: This Year’s Promises <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students write promises and commitments for the coming year.• Take the list to synagogue, send hard copy or schedule email with the list to be sent next year.	Paper, pen Possibly: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• computer access to email the list• envelopes, postage	15 minutes

Part I: Introduction (15 mins)

A. Intro Activity (students can also do this at home and come to class with their list)
Give students a piece of paper and ask them to make a list of promises they have made over the past year – to siblings, parents, teammates, teachers, themselves, etc. Provide a few examples: perhaps they have promised not to tease their brother or sister anymore, or maybe they promised to do their homework before watching television.

Then ask students to share some of their promises – they don’t have to if they don’t want to. Write those shared on the board.

B. Discussion

- Did you fulfill every single promise you made?
- How do you feel when someone does not keep a promise to you?

- Categorize the promises: those made to other people, those made to yourself. Are there any promises you made to God? (Or, if students do not say there are, ask if they know of people who make promises to God and, if so, how those promises may be different from those made to other people or oneself.)
- Which promises are hardest to keep – to others, to God, to oneself?

Conclude the discussion by saying the following:

“Judaism distinguishes between sins, actions and promises made between humans and God (*ben adam lemaqom*) and those made only between humans (*ben adam lechavero*). So, if you commit a sin against another human being or break a promise to another person then you are responsible for asking *that person* for forgiveness during the High Holiday season. You cannot ask God. And the reverse is true, as well.

“You will now watch a story and I want you to pay attention to the promises made in the story, if they are kept and the consequences. We will discuss them after we watch the film.”

Part II: “Three Promises” (30 minutes):

A. Watch Centropa’s film about Matilde and Breda Kalef, “Three Promises.” <http://centropastudent.org/?typ=subtitel&fLang=ENG&movID=47&nID=78&q=m&PHPSESSID=0986e2b477d79a2868869cd4a3b6962b>. Download the film and burn it to a CD (recommended), or show it from the Internet if you have wireless access in your classroom.

Note: Serbia, currently an independent country, was part of Yugoslavia during WWII. For a brief overview of the Holocaust in Serbia, see the US Holocaust Museum’s article, “Axis Invasion of Yugoslavia,” at <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005456>.

B. Discussion

- What were the three promises in this story?
 - Dona Bat Kalef’s promise to her husband to protect their children.
 - Father Tumpej’s promise to Dona Bat Kalef.
 - Breda Kalef’s promise to herself that Father Tumpej would be publicly acknowledged by Yad Vashem for saving the lives of her and her sister.
- Were they promises to other people or to God?
- Can you make a promise to another person that is also a promise to God? Discuss. (Perhaps the priest in the film did this since saving a life is an important religious value.)
- Why do you think Judaism makes a distinction between promises made to God and promises made to humans? How does this help us take responsibility for our actions?

- To what extent do the promises you make define who you are?

Part III: This Year's Promises (15 minutes)

A. Students write a list of commitments and promises they want to make for the coming year. Ask them: Who do you want to be and how is that reflected in the obligations you take on and the promises you make? Break down that question for them:

What commitments and promises do you want to make for the coming year?

- Think of the different relationships in your life – as sister/brother, student, team player, son/daughter, grandson/granddaughter, friend, etc. – what commitments do you want to bring to them this year?
- What commitments do you want to make to yourself?
- What commitments do you want to make with God?

B. Students write down their lists of promises/commitments. Here are several ideas of what to do with the lists – do one, do two or do all!

- Take the list to synagogue on Yom Kippur this year and use it to prompt your reflection on the past year and the year to come during services.
- Each student types his/her list in an email to be automatically sent and received in September 2013; you can use <http://www.futureme.org> to schedule the sending of an email.
- Teachers: Make copies of each student's list and mail it to students in August 2013 so they can see them before during Elul and the before the High Holidays.