
A Bravery Fiercer than Death: The 35 Heroes of Gush Etzion Teacher's Guide

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I. Introduction

It may be worthwhile to give the students a general introduction to the [film](#) before viewing. Although the film explains the events well, you may want to acquaint yourself with some background information while preparing to show it to students. Elements from section IV can be used for such an introduction, but the section below should provide sufficient context. You can [follow this link](#) to print a simple handout if you choose to, or use text with [these pictures](#) to make your own handout. Alternatively, students can be presented with Haim Gouri's [poem](#) or Ben-Gurion's [letter](#) to the bereaved parents.

The story of the *Lamed Hey* (thirty five) is a dramatic and tragic episode in the birth of the State of Israel. On January 16th, 1948, 35 young Haganah soldiers—mostly students at the Hebrew University—set out from Jerusalem to bring much needed supplies to the kibbutzim in the besieged [Gush Etzion](#) (Etzion Bloc) south of the city. The soldiers were ambushed en route, and, despite fighting valiantly, the entire company was killed prior to reaching their destination. While not as well known outside of Israel, this story played an important role in the national narrative of the young Jewish state. The personal testimonies of the people involved provide a deeper, humanized dimension to this important historical incident.

The story was covered in the February 2nd 1948 issue of *Time* magazine. It read,

“The picture was reminiscent of the terrible black & white mass of photographs that had illustrated the war and the war-crimes trials. It also recalled the fierce word pictures of how Old Testament warriors dealt with their enemies. It showed the mutilated bodies of 35 young Haganah fighters who had been ambushed by Arabs at Kfar Etzion, in the lonely hills of Hebron.”

The strategically important region of Gush Etzion played an important part in the early years of the Zionist movement and continues to do so today.

II. Themes

There are several themes that this film addresses for classroom use. Depending on how much time is available for the class, you may want to choose one particular theme, or use the questions in “Discussion Openers” in section III to feel out which theme the students want to discuss.

- A. Heroism
- B. “All Jews are responsible for one another” – כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה
- C. Obeying orders even when one disagrees (going back with the wounded soldier)
- D. The limits of mercy? (letting the wood collectors go—we must be very careful to be sure to avoid passing judgement here)
- E. Sacrifice is required to both create and maintain nations and freedom

III. Discussion Questions

The questions provided below will hopefully give you the tools to bring the classroom discussion to life and help the students unpack the various themes and messages that the film expresses. These questions can also be used for assignments, which can be combined with sources from section IV. It’s important to allow students some time to emotionally process the film before moving on to a more intellectual discussion. It goes without saying that these questions are just suggestions; feel free to take the discussion in any direction you choose.

Intro: Discussion openers (meta-questions)

- Do you think it is important for Jews to remember this story? Why?
- What lessons or morals does it have for us today?
- What would you say are the themes of the film?
- What specific moments in the film impacted/impressed/surprised you the most? (e.g. smuggling weapons in the funeral caravan)

A. Heroism

- Who is a hero? What does heroism mean?

- What advice did Dani Mass reject? What was the logic of this advice? Why did he reject it? Should he be second guessed in retrospect? Does it impact the heroism in any way?
- What leadership skills did you observe in Dani Mass? (e.g. Issuing orders that the two men without weapons must stay behind, ordering the men he chose to accompany the wounded to go back, arguing with the commander of Hartuv that he needs to fulfill his mission, Zvi Zamir's description of his thought process)
- Had the mission been successful, would the 35 have been considered any more or less heroic? Why or why not? Would their story have been as famous?
- Are the five who did not make the journey heroes because they were willing to go? Is the soldier who took his wounded comrade back to safety heroic?
- Were the residents of Gush Etzion waiting for aid heroic?
- Who are the similar heroes in Israeli society today? In what ways are they like the 35?
- Do you want to be the kind of person who would agree to go on that kind of mission? Why or why not?

B. "All Jews are responsible for one another" – כל ישראל ערבים זה לזה

- Is it always right for a soldier or a group of soldiers to put themselves at risk to help others? What would be the deciding factors?
- Since the 35 died without fulfilling their mission, would you say that they died in vain? Why not?
- Do you think you would have been willing to go on that mission? Why or why not?

C. Obeying orders even when one disagrees (Going back with the wounded soldier)

- Did the soldier seem relieved that he had to go back? Why not?
- Why did he go back if he didn't want to? Do you think that was the correct decision? Why or why not?
- What kinds of orders would some Israeli soldiers find difficult to obey today? Why? What should they do?
- Would you have followed the order to go back? Would you have been angry or relieved?

D. The limits of mercy (Letting the wood collectors go—we must be very careful to be sure to avoid passing judgement here. Also, this could be an excellent trigger for a discussion of *Tohar HaNeshek*—the IDF’s principal of Purity of Arms. See section IV for sources)

- Should the 35 have let the Arab wood collectors go? What were their options? Is it possible that the 35 didn’t even notice them?
- What was the consequence of their choice? Do the results raise moral implications on the choice itself?
- How does one weigh humanitarian concerns for civilians in another group against protecting the safety of the soldiers or citizens of one’s own group?
- How does Israel struggle with this problem today? How well do you think they handle it? How can Israel be judged on this?
- What do you think you would have done when you saw the Arabs observing you?

E. Sacrifice is required to both create and maintain nations and freedom

- Thomas Jefferson said that “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” What do you think he meant? Why did he think so? Do you agree with him? Do you think that this quote applies to the story of the 35? Why or why not?
- As a society, how do we decide which sacrifices are worthwhile? How do we know if the price is too high?
- Why are memorials of lost soldiers such an important part of the modern Israeli landscape? What are the implications of this?
- Why are soldiers who died in battle such a central part of the modern Israeli narrative? (e.g. [Trumpeldor](#), [Szenesh](#), [Roi Klein](#), etc.) What are the implications of this?
- What kinds of non-military sacrifices were made by Jews at that time? What about today? Is there a hierarchy for the types of sacrifice? (i.e. are some more important than others?)
- What, if anything, do the residents of the Gush today owe the 35?
- What do you think you would have been willing to sacrifice for the Jewish nation had you lived at that time? What are you willing to sacrifice today?

IV. Background material

*Click the links to read more information that will provide deeper context to the film.
These can be used for teacher preparation, or for student assignments.*

Gush Etzion

[Wikipedia page](#)

[Zionism page](#)

[Local website](#)

[Tourism site](#)

Historical Background

Wikipedia pages: [Partition Plan](#), [War of Independence](#), [Civil War stage—1947-1948](#)

The New York Times Education section: [Partition Plan](#), [Israeli Independence](#), [Front page, May 14th, 1948](#)

[Zionism page](#)

[Jewish Virtual Library](#)

The Mission of the 35 and its Legacy

[Wikipedia page](#)

[Arutz 7 account](#)

[Haaretz article and book review](#)

[Jerusalem Post article](#)

[Photo of Lamed Hey monument](#)

[Path of Lamed Hey Wikipedia entry](#)

[OU article](#)

[Aspaqlaria article](#)

[Haim Gouri Hebrew Poem about the 35](#)

[David Ben-Gurion's letter to parents of Lamed Hey](#)

[Moshe Perlstein, the American \(and YU student\) member of the 35](#)

[Contemporary letter from an American in Israel, acquaintance of Perlstein](#)

Tohar HaNeshek—Purity of Arms

[IDF site](#)

[Jewish Virtual Library](#)

[Wikipedia entry](#)

V. Story of the Goral HaGra used to identify bodies:

Several months after the fall of Gush Etzion, the 240 bodies of the fallen in the battles of Gush Etzion were brought to Mt. Herzl for reinterment. Not all of the bodies of the Lamed Hey were able to be identified. The story of Rav Aryeh Levine using the Goral HaGra to identify the 12 members of the 35 who could not be recognized is eerie, moving, powerful and strange. It can be impactful on students, although the educational lessons may be hard to discern. It should be used judiciously. While not studied by historians, there exists reliable anecdotal evidence to its occurrence.

From Haaretz Article:

One dramatic instance of the use of the Gra lottery was in the identification of the bodies of 12 members of the *Lamed Hey* (the Convoy of 35, with the Hebrew letters *lamed* and *hey* being equivalent to the numbers 30 and 5, respectively). The 35 fighters, members of the Haganah pre-state militia, were killed in January 1948, during the War of Independence, at the foot of the Arab village of Tzurif, during their attempt to reach the Etzion Bloc of Jewish settlements, south of Jerusalem. The bodies of the fighters were mutilated by the Arab attackers who killed them, and only in 1951 were the corpses gathered. By that time, it was possible to identify only 23 of the bodies conclusively.

The chief rabbi of Jerusalem at the time, Tzvi Pesach Frank, ruled that the identification of the remaining bodies would be determined by the Gra lottery, and the task was assigned to the revered Jerusalem sage Rabbi Aryeh Levin.

The identification took place in Levin's beit midrash, in the presence of representatives of the bereaved parents. Twelve candles were lit, the Bible was opened at random seven times and Rabbi Levin ruled that as they stood in front of the remains of each of the fallen fighters, the last verse on the page had to include the name, or an allusion to the name, of each of those whom they were trying to identify. "How amazed everyone was when one of the verses that first appeared was 'The earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein,' a verse that [in Hebrew] begins with the word 'to the Lord,'" which is abbreviated in Hebrew with the initials *lamed hey*. "Moreover, to everyone's amazement, every page spoke unequivocally. In the first verse they reached there was a specific name that clearly identified one of the fallen ... One after the other ... the identity of the fallen was determined." (Quoted in *A Tzaddik in Our Time: The Life of Rabbi Aryeh Levin*, by Simcha Raz, who also provides the official minutes of the lottery.) While a lottery was often used for private matters, here the lottery was conducted for the purpose of a decision of great public significance.

VI. Closing Activity

In order to give the students an opportunity to internalize the ideas discussed, and to put some closure on the discussion, you may opt to close with the following activity.

Give each student a piece of paper and markers/crayons. Each student should produce a tribute card/memorial for the 35 soldiers. They can choose to include verbal and artistic representations of any of the lessons that were learned from their story. Hang up their cards in the classroom to serve as a memorial for the fallen soldiers and a reminder of lessons learned.

Toldot Yisrael is a Jerusalem-based nonprofit dedicated to recording and sharing the firsthand testimonies of the men and women who helped found the State of Israel. Over 600 video interviews have been conducted with those who were involved in the pre-State struggle and the momentous events of 1948. Our aim is to conduct hundreds more over the next several years—while it is still possible. The Toldot Yisrael archive is housed in Israel's National Library, the official library of the State of Israel and the Jewish people. The **Eyewitness 1948** films present stories that address the heroism of the era as well as the complex moral dilemmas confronted by a young nation battling for its existence. Toldot Yisrael's footage serves as primary-source materials for educational curricula that bring to life the founding of the State of Israel for today's young Jews.

For more information about Toldot Yisrael or to see our other films, visit our website, toldotyisrael.org or our YouTube channel, youtube.com/toldotyisrael.