



Falling from Greatness

Topic

How the Mighty Have Fallen

Grade Level

7th-10th

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will:

- Study Jewish texts regarding how people gain admiration.
- Gain the sensibility that everyone is flawed through reading about “heroic” biblical characters, finding both their strengths and weaknesses.
- Assess, with the assistance of Jewish texts, if modern society allows us too much access to and knowledge about the private lives of our leaders and icons.
- Review the steps of *teshuvah* and explore, according to their understanding, if *teshuvah* is possible in differing situations and how it might be achieved.

Materials Needed

- Blackboard/Whiteboard or large paper, and markers
- Make copies: (located in separate download called Support Materials):
 - *Who is Worthy?* and *Do We Know Too Much?* text studies
 - One copy of Bible Hero Cards
- Twenty pennies or plastic chips for each student
- A piece of paper with all of the members of the class listed, giving students room to write after each name

Background for the Teacher

A number of times during this lesson, students have the opportunity to take a closer look at biblical or public figures who, though they once had power or fame or wealth, lost this due to misconduct or scandal (or both). In choosing possible public figures for discussion, we have omitted religious leaders. We know that there are examples of leaders within the Jewish community, as well as other religious communities, who have lost positions of power and respect due to their own actions. Issues of clergy misconduct are often emotionally charged and difficult for adults to discuss, let alone adolescents. If the idea comes up during your class session, we invite you to use your discretion, given your knowledge of your students, as to whether to pursue this as a topic for discussion.

Rabbi Jeremiah

Jeremiah was a 4th century Palestinian scholar. Though he didn't show much academic promise as a child, he advanced rapidly upon moving to Caesaria and becoming a student of Rabbi Abbahu, Rabbi Samuel b. Isaac and Rabbi Ze'era. His teachers are said to have loved him like a son. With time, Jeremiah became a very serious student, wanting to learn new things as quickly and thoroughly as possible. He was known for being one of the most zealous students of the academy at the time. In his quest to understand every detail of the law, he often asked questions which pushed the limits of logic and halacha, provoking laughter, but also annoyance, among colleagues. Eventually, they tired of him and he was asked to leave. Many years later, after the greatest minds of a generation had died, there was a question that no one could answer. Jeremiah was able to answer it showing great humility and was allowed back into the academy.



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Teshuvah

Though *teshuvah* is often translated as repentance, the Jewish concept is a bit more complicated. *Teshuvah* comes from the root word “*shuv*” – to return. Through a series of pro-active steps, the person who has erred or transgressed is said to be able to restore relationships and “return” to the person they were before the transgression. Though traditional sources differ on the content and the order of some of the steps, the general outline is as follows:

- Admitting the error to yourself
- Stating the error out loud, preferably to someone else, so as to be held accountable.
- Apologizing, repairing physical damage if possible, engaging in restorative actions or conversations.
- Making a plan so that, if confronted with a similar opportunity to transgress again, the person will make a different choice.

According to Jewish law, one person isn’t allowed to remind someone of their past misconduct, especially if they’ve done the work of *teshuva*.

Michael Milken

Michael Milken (b. 1946) is an American businessman and financier known for developing the high yield bond market. During the late 1980s, headlines were full of stories of insider trading: using information not available to the general public to gain an advantage in the stock and bond markets. While being investigated on suspicion of insider trading, Milken was indicted for racketeering and securities fraud. He was found guilty of a lesser charge, agreed to as part of a plea bargain, and was sentenced to ten years in prison. He would serve two, before an early release for good behavior. He was also fined six-hundred million dollars and barred from working in the financial industry.

Milken is one of the founders of a family foundation bearing his surname, as well as a number of other medical charities. Since his release from prison these organizations have funded research primarily in the areas of cancer research, as Milken is a prostate cancer survivor. The funding provided by philanthropies with which he is involved was such that, in its November, 2004 issue, *Fortune* magazine called him "The Man Who Changed Medicine."

Oskar Schindler

Oskar Schindler, born in Austria-Hungary in 1908, was a German industrialist and businessman perhaps most well-known for saving the lives of more than 1,100 Jews during World War II.

Schindler was a member of the Nazi party and a war profiteer. When the German army advanced into Poland, Schindler followed, looking for a way to make money. He purchased a Jewish owned enamel factory renaming it *Deutsche Emalwarenfabrik Oskar Schindler* (German Enamelware Factory Oskar Schindler) as well as two other factories. He employed Jewish workers from the Krakow Ghetto at the enamel factory who remained in his employ after being transferred to the Krakau-Plaszow concentration camp. Because of the brutal conditions in the camps, Schindler intervened on behalf of his employees many times, mainly by bribing SS officials.

Schindler often went out of his way to help his Jewish factory workers. When the Krakow Ghetto was liquidated, he allowed workers to stay overnight, and when they were moved he moved his factory so they could continue working. He twice convinced the SS to classify his plants as “subcamps” of larger concentration camps, shielding his workers from some of the brutality of life under constant SS watch. So that his workers would be seen as essential, he had each plant



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classified to make armaments, though one of these made only one wagon-load in the eight months it was in operation.

Though Schindler saved many, many lives, he opened factories for the sole purpose of war-profiteering. He was known to be a heavy drinker and, though he was married, his affairs were both numerous and well-known. Schindler declared bankruptcy in 1958, left his wife, had a number of failed businesses and relied on the support of the Jewish community until the end of his life.

Description of Activities

There is a great deal of material here, including a number of optional activities. This might all be covered in one hour-and-a-half class, or you might split the material over a number of class sessions. If you choose to split the material, it is best taught in three parts: 1-2, 3-4, and 5-6. The optional activities are meant for class settings in which students like to take a deeper look or are somewhat introspective.

1. Who Do You Look Up To?

- Draw a vertical line on the black/white board, splitting it in half.
- Ask students to think of someone who they see as a role model or personal hero.
- Invite a few students to share whom they have chosen as well as a few words about this person and why they were chosen.
- Solicit a few traits displayed by these people, and write them on the left side of the board. Examples might include such things as: courage, wisdom, kindness, perseverance, etc.

2. Who is Worthy?

- Split students into three groups.
- Hand out the *Who is Worthy?* text study.
- Assign each group a text and corresponding questions. Instruct them to read the text aloud and to answer the questions. Let them know that they will be reporting out to classmates.
- After ten minutes of study, invite groups to summarize the text they read and discussed.
- As students are reporting out, list any positive traits from the texts on the right side of the board.
- You may choose to propose some of the study questions to the whole group.

Optional:

- If you feel as though there are not enough positive traits written on the right side of the board, you might ask students to think of reasons why the certain biblical characters are worthy of admiration. A few examples follow (keep in mind that other biblical figures who can be perceived as falling from greatness are used as examples later in the lesson):
 - Abraham (stands up to father, stands up to God, not afraid to leave home)
 - Joseph (shares his gift of prophecy, forgives his brothers)
 - Miriam (pulls her brother from the river)
 - Joshua and Caleb (represent the truth among the spies)

3. Nobody's Perfect



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There are two options for introducing this next activity, using the biblical Noah or the Talmudic scholar, Jeremiah. **If choosing Jeremiah, proceed as follows.** (The material on Noah is below.)

- Tell students the story of Rabbi Jeremiah (find the Talmudic text below). The basic theme is that Jeremiah was clearly learned enough to sit in the assembly and participate in high level Talmudic discussions, but that his ridiculous questions so annoyed his colleagues that he was asked to leave.

Baba Batra 23b

The Gemara asks: If so, say the latter clause of the Mishna: If it was found beyond fifty cubits from a dovecote, it belongs to its finder. And if there is no other dovecote in the area, it certainly fell from that dovecote. How, then, can it be given to the finder? The Gemara answers: With what are we dealing here? We are dealing with a chick that hops from place to place but does not yet fly. As Rav Ukva bar Hama says: With regard to any creature that hops, it does not hop more than fifty cubits. Consequently, any bird found within fifty cubits of a dovecote is assumed to have come from there. If it is farther away than that, it likely came from elsewhere or was dropped by travelers.

Jeremiah raises a dilemma: If one leg of the chick was within fifty cubits of the dovecote, and one leg was beyond fifty cubits, what is the halakha? The Gemara comments: And it was for his question about this far-fetched scenario that they removed Rabbi Jeremiah from the study hall, as he was apparently wasting the Sages' time.

- From this story, ask students to name Jeremiah's positive and negative traits.
- Proceed to the bullets after the directions for Noah

If you chose Noah, proceed as follows:

- Read the Torah text below.
- Ask students the accompanying questions.

Genesis 6:5-9

And Adonai saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. Adonai regretted that human beings had been created on the earth, and God's heart was deeply troubled. And Adonai said: "I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and creeping thing, and fowl of the air; for it troubles me that I have made them." But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Adonai. These are the generations of Noah. **Noah was in his generations a man righteous and whole-hearted; Noah walked with God**

The story of Noah begins with a statement that the people of the world at the time were wicked and consumed only with evil thoughts. We are told of Noah that: a) he found grace in the eyes of Adonai and b) he was, in his generations, a man righteous and whole-hearted.

1. Some commentators suggest that Noah was the best among a rotten bunch. Others say that, even surrounded by evil, Noah was righteous—a hard thing to achieve. Which of these interpretations do you think is right?
2. Can someone who is described as the best among a group of wicked people be a hero? Why or why not?



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Whether you chose to study Noah or Rabbi Jeremiah, begin again here:

- Give each student, or pair of students, a bible hero card.
- Instruct them to think about the character and, on the back of the card, write a few traits that make that person a hero or a zero. If students are unable to think of traits, they can write stories; you can help translate them into traits during the next part of the exercise.
- Invite students to report out, naming their character and both positive and negative traits or aspects of their story. Write the positive aspects on the left side of the board, where you've written other positive traits, write the negative traits on the other side.

4. Does the Bad Outweigh the Good

- Remind students that, like biblical characters, most people are complex. Use the following example about Oskar Schindler to demonstrate the point:
 - Ludwik Feigenbaum, as quoted in "Schindler: Why did he do it?" (2010) by Louis Bülow
I don't know what his motives were, even though I knew him very well. I asked him and I never got a clear answer and the film doesn't make it clear, either. But I don't give a damn. What's important is that he saved our lives.
 - Zev Kedem, as quoted in "Schindler: Why did he do it?" (2010) by Louis Bülow
If he was a virtuous, honest guy, no one in a corrupt, greedy system like the SS would accept him. ... In a weird world that celebrated death, he recognized the Jews as humans. Schindler used corrupt ways, creativity and ingenuity against the monster machine dedicated to death.
- Now that they've been exposed to various historical figures who fell from greatness, ask students if they can think of someone who was once in a position of fame or power and has now lost that position. Invite students to share briefly.
- Once students have shared, give each twenty pennies. Ask them, on a scale of one to ten to rate the person's contribution to society, and to rate the infraction that caused their downfall (Ten being the largest contribution and the biggest infraction). If any of the people students mention are known by all, have the whole class participate in the rating. Discuss whether or not they feel that the figures mentioned were treated fairly.

Optional Activity:

- Give each student a piece of paper on which you've typed or written each class member's name with spaces following for writing. Instruct participants to write one of their flaws in the space next to their own name and, in the spaces next to their classmates, write something at which those people are skilled.
- Solicit a volunteer and invite that person to stand in front of the class. Invite students to share aloud a talent or skill they perceive that person possesses. Ask the student, with or without naming their perceived flaw aloud, if their flaw stops them from excelling in the area named by the other students.



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- Ask if a person's work or impact can still be seen as valuable once they have transgressed. For example: Can the comedy of Bill Cosby or Woody Allen still be considered funny knowing that each man has been accused of sexual misconduct with minors (not the subject of their humor)?
- Does it matter if the person's downfall was directly related to the reason for their fame? Should an athlete who was doping or a singer who was lip syncing be judged more harshly than an athlete who bet on dog fighting or a singer who mistreated her children's live-in caregiver or cheated on her taxes?

5. Do We Know Too Much?

- Distribute the *Do We Know Too Much?* handout.
- Read and discuss the texts and questions as a class.
- Remind students that these texts were written more than 1000 years ago. Ask them what kinds of laws they would write, or limits they would put, when suggesting how we should best learn from and about the people we look up to.

6. Is *Teshuvah* Possible?

- Review the concept of *teshuvah*, asking students what they remember about this concept and reviewing the four steps of *teshuvah* (found in the Background for the Teacher section above).
- Let students know that Judaism also prevents us from reminding someone who has found a better path about past sins. Ask students if they agree or disagree with this rule and if they think it's possible to do this in today's society.
- Ask students if they've hear of the phrase "forgive and forget." Solicit understandings of this phrase. Let students know that many people assume that the phrase is from the Bible, but that it actually has its origins – phrased a little differently – in *Don Quixote* by Miguel Cervantes.
- Invite students to sit on different sides of the room in response to the following: Based on your knowledge of Judaism, should we forgive and forget? Those who answer in the affirmative should sit on one side of the room, those who answer in the negative should sit on the other side. Give them five or so minutes to prepare and ask them to debate the issue.
- Let students know that Judaism does not require us to forget. Though we shouldn't bring up someone's past mistakes, we can learn from them and protect ourselves if we choose.

Optional:

If you care to share a story of someone who did *teshuvah*, former financier turned philanthropist, Michael Milken, is a good example.