

The Journey of Vaan Nguyen

What Makes an Israeli Israeli?

Recommendations

This is a strong engaging film that raises issues of identity and homeland. It can be relevant when discussing topics relating to the "Jewish homeland" in Israel as well as discussions of minorities in society in general.

This film would be especially appropriate in a class examining the experience of Jews in the Diaspora as a minority; the film would provide a contrast. It is an interesting exploration into the life of a young Israeli woman whose family is Vietnamese and sought asylum from the war in the 1970s. Her family was invited into Israel, motivated by the memory of the Jewish people's own national struggles in the Diaspora, and was granted citizenship.

The film explores the personal and social issues that arise for a Vietnamese Israeli woman. This lesson will take approximately two and a half hours to complete. Time approximations will be provided for each section. It can be divided up over a number of class periods or, ideally, used for a workshop style study session.

Target Age Group

9th grade and up.

Objectives

- Students will learn about a very unique minority group in Israel; refugees, specifically from Vietnam.
- Students will explore the concept of searching for a homeland.
- Students will discuss the notion of a Jewish homeland and how they personally relate to this concept.
- Students will learn about the displacement often felt by refugees.
- Students will examine their own identities and personal concept of homeland.

Supplementary Materials

Appendix #1 Background Article on Vietnamese Boat People

Appendix #2 Discussion Questions

OPENING ACTIVITY - Exploring Cultural Identity (30-40 minutes)

Goal: To introduce the concept of "cultural identity" to students. Students will explore their own self-characterizations and discuss the factors that form their identity.

(a) Who am I?

Give each student a piece of paper. Tell them they will have one minute to write down every word they can think of that characterizes them. Give an example about yourself, as the teacher. For instance, I would say that I am a girl, I am short, I am Jewish, I am American and Israeli, I am a teacher, I studied in university, etc, etc... This brainstorm will be used after the next game.

(b) "Huggy-Bears" Game

This game asks that students form small groups based on a shared characteristic and a particular number of members. Students may NOT talk to each other while they are forming these groups, so they are forced to develop body language and other ways to communicate without using their voices. The class can play 5-7 rounds of this game - initially the teacher will provide the parameters; however, as the game progresses students can raise their hands to offer other parameter suggestions.

Examples of groups:

- Groups of three that are all wearing the same type of shoes (sandals, sneakers, boots)
- Groups of four that are wearing glasses, contacts or nothing at all
- Groups of three that all born in the same season
- Groups of six that are all wearing the same sleeve length
- Groups of four, either all boys or all girls, that are around the same height
- Groups of five based on eye color

The final round should put students in groups that number evenly into the class for the next activity (i.e. if the class has 25 students, groups of five, if there are 30 students, groups of 6, etc...)

(c) Like You, Like Me

Ask students to bring their earlier brainstorm to these small groups. In their groups, students will read their characterizations aloud to each other. Then, as a group, they will try to give titles to different groups of characterizations that fall under the same general term, such as sex, religion and age.

At this stage, ask the different groups to share their categories. List all the categories on the board, check-marking those that appear multiple times. Those that appear more often are clearly categories that affect students more.

Discuss this with students: what are the things about ourselves that most strikingly characterize who we are? Is there a category that EVERY group identified? Which ones? Ask individual students to explain why they think these categories have more of an affect on their lives.

In light of this class discussion, ask students in their small groups (or in pairs if time is limited) to each share an experience they had which strengthened their identification as one of these categories. For example, an anti-Semitic experience will often strengthen Jewish identity or the first time a girl wears high-heeled shoes, she feels like a woman.

After this sharing, bring the discussion back to the group forum. Invite a couple of students to share their experiences with the whole class. Reflect on the types of experiences that define our characterizations of ourselves based on these stories. The purpose of this discussion is to explore how we identify ourselves, as this is a major issue in the film.

SECOND ACTIVITY - Vietnamese Israelis? (15 minutes)

Goal: To learn how Vietnamese refugees came to live in Israel and to understand their status as full fledged Israeli citizens.

Still in their groups, hand students a copy of Appendix #1.

Ask students to read and discuss the article about the official asylum granted Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s.

Discuss the information as a class based on the following questions:

- What do they think are the diplomatic benefits of such asylum granting?
- Can they envision what issues or problems might develop in this situation?
- These Vietnamese refugees are full citizens of the State of Israel, but do not fall into either of her main ethnic categories: those of Jewish origin and local populations granted citizenship after the war in 1948. Considering this, what makes these residents Israeli?
- What might make them not-Israeli?
- Do students agree with Prime Minister Begin's decision to grant these refugees asylum? Why or why not?

Based on the discussion, try to write a couple of sentences that describe the class' reaction to the Vietnamese refugee community in Israel.

Note to Teacher

These sentences will be used later in the lesson. Write them down, especially if the lesson happens in more than one session, to be re-written on the board later after watching the film.

THIRD ACTIVITY - Film Viewing (70 minutes)

*Goal: To watch the film "The Journey of Vaan Nguyen."
As they are watching, students will also be asked to record specific bits of information to be used in the discussion afterwards.*

Tell students that besides telling the story of a Vietnamese family living in Israel, this film also explores the idea of cultural identity.

- How is identity formed?
- What part of identity comes from family and what part from society?
- How do a father and daughter relate differently to their personal identity and why?

Divide the class in half. One half of the class will be asked to take notes on the father's cultural identity and longings as shown in the film. The other half of the class will be asked to record Vaan's identity and cultural longings.

These two very different narratives shed light on the interesting phenomena of being a non-Jewish group (that is not the Arab minority) in Israel. The film also explores the duality of the effects that birth and upbringing have on a child, combined with and sometimes opposing surrounding influences, in forming cultural identity. In addition, ask students to note places in which these feelings change for one character or the other.

Screen the film.

Although we recommend watching the whole film, if time does not permit, the following parts can be excluded because they are not dealt with in this lesson: (times listed counting from the beginning of the film onwards)

- 9:40-12:50 Parents visiting the cemetery where their deceased children are buried and telling their experience of struggling to find a cemetery that would agree to bury them)
- 31:25-37:30 Mr. Nguyen researching land ownership in Vietnam)
- 46:30-48:30 More land searching and visit to family cemetery plot)
- 54:50-69:25 More land searching; discussions about documentation, how the search will go, what efforts they can make to get the lands, if any)

FOURTH ACTIVITY - Identity Differences: Vaan and Father (40 minutes)

Goal: To process the film emotionally and to examine the different narratives of Vaan and her father in relation to cultural identity and the longing for "homeland."

(a) Respond in writing

First ask students to share their reactions to the film. Did it make them nostalgic, sad, happy, confused, etc...?

Go back to the sentences the class composed in the second activity. Ask a volunteer to read the sentences aloud. After having seen the film, are these sentences still accurate? For example, if students wrote that refugees are privileged to be a part of Israeli society, after seeing the film they might understand how complex and confusing it is to be Vietnamese and Israeli.

Ask each student to rewrite the sentences in light of the film. What do they think about Vaan's identity and about her father's? Ask a few students to share.

(b) When Home is Out of Reach

Divide the class into groups that correspond with their assignment for the movie, to record either Vaan's or her father's identity and cultural longings. Groups should have 4-6 members that all looked at the same character so divide the class accordingly. Ask students to share what they wrote down throughout the film.

Ask students to discuss the following questions as well (a printable version to give to each group can be found in Appendix #2):

Vaan

- Why does she want to go to Vietnam with her father?
- What about her life in Israel makes her long for a different home?
- In what ways is Vaan very Israeli?
- What experiences does she describe that made her feel like an outsider in Israeli society?
- At what point(s) do these feelings change?
- What are the causes for these changes?
- How does she feel about her identity when she is in Vietnam?
- By the end of the film, what identity do you think Vaan feels more connected to?

Vaan's Father

- What is the root of his longing for Vietnam?
- How does he feel in Israel?
- What is his relationship with his immigrant friends?
- What is his relationship with his Vietnamese / Israeli daughters?
- When he is back in Vietnam how does he feel initially?
- How does he feel as he starts to search for his lands (note especially his conversation with the old man in his village)?
- Does his identity change throughout the film?

Note to teacher

For Vaan's father, Vietnam is his homeland. He grew up there and loved his country. War forced him to seek asylum elsewhere. He consistently longed for his home, as we can see through his letters to family, his journal and through his conversations with fellow immigrants, even as he bravely raised his family in Israel. Upon returning, he finds that someone tells him to keep longing, because he has gone away and is no longer a "local."

For Vaan, despite her home being Vietnamese in character, her education and upbringing were in Israel. She was educated in Jewish Israeli schools, frustrated by constant questions about where she was born and why a Vietnamese woman speaks such perfect Hebrew and even went through the army (which we learn when the family sees Vered off to the army and Vaan tells her father that Vered will turn crazy in the army just as Vaan did.)

Note that the part when Vaan says "kamoney bid-yuk, just like me" is not properly translated from the Hebrew to English, so you can point this part out to students so they know that Vaan was, in fact, in the army.

When Vaan is in Vietnam, where the people look like her, she realizes that she is a foreigner to them because her cultural identity and behavior are Israeli.

Give students ample time to discuss these questions and specify tangible proofs in the film for their answers.

(c) When Home is Out of Reach, part II

Ask students to divide into pairs that cross over between the groups (so that each pair has one student who discussed Vaan and his/her partner discussed Vaan's father). In this format, give students 5-10 minutes to share what their groups found in terms of these characters' identity.

- What factors form their identity in light of the fact that these factors are very different for Vaan than for her father?
- What are their struggles with identity?
- Why is home out of reach?
- What is home?
- Can students identify with these feelings in some way?
- Have they ever felt like an "outsider" in their hometown?
- Invite students to share their experiences with each other.
- Were there moments in the film when they identified with a character?
- If so, when and why?

After 10 minutes or so, ask students to explain, based on their discussions, why the subtitle of the film is "when home is out of reach."

- What is "home?"
- Why is it "out of reach" for these two people?

CLOSING ACTIVITY - What is Homeland?

Goal: To come back to the larger class forum and process what students discovered about Vaan's and her father's identity. To bring all these discussions together and explore what is "homeland."

(a) Group Discussion

Invite students to share highlights from their discussions. Did they disagree with their small groups and/or partners? What were their rationales for understanding why home is out of reach for Vaan and her father? Also, ask them to share what they thought of the film's subtitle, "when home is out of reach," and how each group explained this in light of both characters.

After some sharing, write the word homeland on the board. In light of the fact that Israel is called the "Jewish Homeland" and knowing that there are a number of populations that live in Israel that are not Jewish, explore this concept.

(b) Final Words

The following question(s) can be addressed as a final group discussion or, better yet, as an independent writing assignment outside of class. These are thematic questions that relate both to the relevant sections of the film screened and to those parts opted out.

Options

- Homeland: What defines your homeland? Is homeland and "Jewish homeland" the same place for you personally? Where is your homeland?
- How do you identify yourself? Is it connected to the place you live, the food you eat, the religion you practice and/or the rituals you enjoy? What are the factors that identify you and how are they expressed in your life?
- *Artful option:* Outside of having a discussion or doing a writing assignment, you can also answer the above questions in collage.

Have students bring in as many magazines and newspapers as they can find. Give each student an 11" X 14" piece of paper and tell them to visually answer the above questions in whatever way they feel best suits them. After completing the project, the class can have a display exhibition and share with each other (and this is an option for sharing on a parent's evening at school) how these collages reflect their answers to the above questions.

APPENDIX #1 – Background Article on Vietnamese Boat People

"Asylum Granted to the Vietnamese Boat People¹"

For much of the 1960's and 1970's, the nation states of Asia were fighting to rid themselves of colonialist rule and, in some cases, battling among themselves in search of a national direction. The Vietnamese people experienced war, both civil and externally imposed, pain and hardship for many years. During the mid 1970's, many Vietnamese citizens, frustrated and fatigued from non-stop conflicts, chose to seek a better life elsewhere. Setting sail on ships of poor integrity, these people sailed from nation to nation seeking asylum. Over time, they would come to be known as the "boat people".

During 1977, one particular group of refugees, after being denied entry by many other nations, found their way to Israel. Newly elected prime minister, Menachem Begin, offered them sanctuary in Israel on June 26. For 66 Vietnamese refugees, the Jewish State became their new home. Begin stated that the Jewish people remember the USS St. Louis and the fate that its passengers met in Nazi Europe because no nation would offer her asylum. We remember the refugee ship Exodus and her crew of Holocaust survivors denied entry during the British Mandate period when immigration was shut off to Palestine. In light of these national experiences, Begin believed that Israel could help.

In recent years, Israel has also provided refuge to Kurds and citizens of war torn Albania and Bosnia. Most recently, in the fall of 2008, Israel absorbed 8,000 Sudanese refugees. It is important to remember that these people are people of other faiths. In light of the Jewish experience, however, that informs the Zionist experiment, we learn from our past and other nations treatment of us and thus want to help others. This lesson comes straight from the Bible in the book of Leviticus 19:34: "The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."

Despite Israel's welcome, these populations remain in cultural limbo: they are full citizens of Israel and yet not connected to the Jewish cultural base. Most of these refugees are provided with a Hebrew Ulpan to learn the language and their children are educated in Israeli schools. Most of their children serve in the army as well.

¹ Adapted from the World Zionist Organization's Hagshama Department article of the same name: <http://www.hagshama.org.il/en/resources/view.asp?id=1058>

APPENDIX #2 – Group Discussion Questions

Vaan

- Why does she want to go to Vietnam with her father?
 - What about her life in Israel makes her long for a different home?
 - In what ways is Vaan very Israeli?
 - What experiences does she describe that made her feel like an outsider in Israeli society?
 - At what point(s) do these feelings change?
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