

# LETTER TO PARENTS

Dear Parent,

Over the past year, a team of authors, editors and educators have collaborated to develop an exciting learning program that will not only be powerful in its appeal to our teenagers, but also contain a relevant message that will speak to them on a personal level.

The primary goal of this series, **“Welcome to Hollywood”**, is to challenge Jewish teens to think deeply about issues related to Hollywood culture and to introduce them to Judaism’s perspective on those issues.

Actual video clips from movies and/or television programs will be presented in each of the six lessons, allowing the students to explore six key values/issues. Questions and activities will facilitate thoughtful discussion about how Hollywood perceives the specific issue. Students will discover how every movie they watch contains a subliminal message and commentary on life. They will be challenged to think deeply and consider the questions, “Who speaks *for* me? What speaks *to* me? Why?”

The second part of each lesson will use primary sources to show how these same issues are perceived and addressed from a Torah perspective. The goal of each lesson is not to have the students agree with this approach, but merely to introduce them to it and allow it to resonate with them. The hope is that they come to understand that like all stories, the Jewish story has a message, which is a deeply powerful and relevant one. Over time, the student may develop a more genuinely Jewish perspective on life and begin to turn increasingly to Judaism for guidance on issues that matter to him or her.

Enclosed is an overview of the upcoming course.

I look forward to speaking with you about this exciting new opportunity in the coming days.

Sincerely,



Rabbi David Flinkenstein

# WELCOME TO HOLLYWOOD

*Your ticket to finding acceptance, friendship, and true stardom*

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- There are many important value choices that we consider in our daily lives. How do we approach these issues? How do others think about these decisions? Is there a right or wrong way to consider them?
- How do Hollywood movies, media, and television influence the way we perceive the most important things in our lives? How much of our perception comes from inside of us? How can one tell the difference between external and internal influences?
- Does the tradition of our ancestors have anything relevant to say about these issues? How would our lives be different if we explored the Torah's message?

## PRIMARY UNDERSTANDINGS

- There are many voices that are vying for our attention. Hollywood films and media, along with other influences, attempt to subtly influence how one should think about the important issues in life. One should therefore think deeply about which voices truly speak for him.
- Movies do not define reality, but merely comment on it. Rather, they are the work of an author who has a specific message. As free-thinking individuals, we must ask ourselves, "Do we agree with the message? Do we think it's a clear depiction of the issue and how it should be approached?"
- Just as films tell a story, our tradition also tells a story and provides a commentary on life. Although its origin is ancient, our tradition has interesting and insightful things to say about the issues with which we deal today.
- Our tradition can serve as an important source of wisdom and guidance as we continue to grapple with the many confusing aspects of life.

# COURSE BREAKDOWN

## Lesson 1: A Star is Born

(Fame vs. Self-Esteem)

This class will focus on the concept of human worth. There are two basic ways to perceive one's importance and worth:

1. Externally, or by one's popularity. In other words, by how many people know who you are and their opinion of you.
2. Inherent/ Innate worth, or in other words, you are important because of the essence of who you are. You were created in the divine image and have an indispensable, unique role to play in this world, regardless of what others may think.

Achieving fame or celebrity status and everything that comes along with it is the highest level of popularity and external worth. This is something that many people seek especially in their youth. In the first half of the class, we will explore the issue of why people seek fame. The second half of the class will look at Torah sources that discuss divinely ordained inherent worth and explore the life implications of such a perspective. We will evaluate whether Torah's wisdom can be used to counter some of Hollywood fame's more nasty side effects and see if perhaps the Torah's messages speak to our lives as well.

## Lesson 2: Friends Forever

(Friends/Social Life)

A good friend is one of few things that are universally acclaimed. Friendship is sought by all and is especially precious to adolescents. Indeed, as kids grow, parental and other familial relations can fade into the background, while peer relationships become increasingly important.

Friendship comes in many shades that serve various roles in life and can therefore be perceived as a continuum. The basic principle is that the more the relationship depends on something external, the "lower" it is on the friendship continuum.

In this lesson, we will focus on various moral dilemmas that challenge the bond of friendship. In doing so, students will hopefully come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of where their own friendships fit on the continuum and see how the decisions they make create the type of relationships that they have. Finally, it will give them an insight into the qualities and decisions that lead to the gift of true friendship.

### **Lesson 3: Get High . . . On Life!**

(Drugs/Alcohol/Escape vs. Growing Through Life's Challenges)

That life has challenges is a given. Perhaps the only meaningful question is how to best confront and deal with them. From time immemorial, a common response to the muck of human existence has been to escape or at least numb the potency of such encounters with alcohol and drugs.

The use of substances to anesthetize oneself to life's experiences is to say, "This is painful, it should not have happened and I don't want to deal with it—at least not in its full intensity." However, the real question that should be asked is, "Why did this happen to me?" If my "number" was randomly chosen to endure senseless suffering, than imbibing, smoking, or injecting some sort of anesthesia makes sense because the primary goal is to minimize the pain. However, if there is indeed a master plan and I play a crucial role in it, then there is no reason to escape these experiences. Life, like any relationship, dons various expressions. From this perspective, the questions one must ask when enduring difficulties is, "What can I learn from this? How can I grow? What can I share with others and the world based on my experience?"

Movies, even those geared at young people, often portray and even venerate the former, while the Torah, which unequivocally declares that everything that happens in our lives is purposeful and deliberate, chooses the latter. The choice of perception is ours.

### **Lesson 4: Love at First Sight?**

(Romance/Infatuation vs. Love)

Romantic love is one of Hollywood's most prominent themes. We are all familiar with the swoony, dreamy, head over heels, love-at-first-sight, obsessive, passionate love stories that, despite their cliché, keep movie goers, tissue in hand, coming back time and time again. What is it about Hollywood love stories that captivate audiences? How accurately do they reflect reality? Is this love or mere infatuation? How do such depictions of love affect our own relationships?

Although the Torah is suspect of such intense encounters, it does not discount the power and possibility of love-at-first-sight moments. In fact, there are biblical examples of such meetings. The Torah describes such an event as a gift, which if squandered or misused, will quickly dissipate. In order for true love to develop from an initial, passionate encounter, it is necessary that each partner sacrifice his own needs for those of the other. Thus, the initial intensity of romantic love is channeled into a healthy, lasting relationship, where the love that is generated is ultimately deeper and more meaningful than the moment of inspiration that started it all.

## **Lesson 5: Show me the Money**

(Is it a Blessing or Curse?)

Money is often described in such extremes as “running the world” and “the underlying root of all evil.” However defined, whether rich or poor, we seem to be a society that is obsessed with money.

How should we perceive the almighty dollar? Is it an entity to be worshipped or loathed? As human beings, we struggle with the desire for more and the nagging question of, “Why do I need it?” As a reflection of societal norms, movies deal with this question. Some movies glorify the unrestrained pursuit of wealth, exemplifying the idea, “Whoever says money is the root of all evil doesn’t have any.” Others could be labeled as anti-consumerist and proclaim that unbridled materialism will lead to an undesirable situation where “the things that you used to own now own you...”

In contrast, the Torah views the relationship between an individual and his wealth as one that has been Divinely ordained. In other words, whether rich or poor, the question is not how much one has, but what one does with it. There is no sin in becoming a successful, wealthy businessman, musician, athlete or actor. Success indicates that G-d has entrusted you to utilize your wealth and the power that comes along with it to accomplish great things for humankind. Consequently, whatever your endeavor, no matter your level of financial success, the question you ask yourself is, “OK, so now what?”

## **Lesson 6: Rebel with a Cause**

(Rebellion/Teen Angst vs. Energy of Transformation)

This final lesson in our course will focus on the intense energy of youth. The idealism, enthusiasm, and vitality of youth have been described as the “engine of the world”. Yet, this energy that has the potential to transform and revolutionize is often unproductively and even destructively wasted. Like fire or any other powerful, untamed force, adolescent vigor can be channeled and directed into a constructive, creative laser beam, which promotes the positive change that our world desperately needs.

As young people turn to into adults, they are more able to transform their hopes into reality. As adults recall their own youthful nature—that energetic, idealistic place within themselves—they are able to relate to young people’s energy and enthusiasm. Then, the adults can serve as guides for the youth who seek channels of expression. As adults openly listen, speak from the heart and relate to the heart of young listeners, the two groups will create a powerful team. This is a partnership in which young people transform the world into a better place and the adults, through living consciously and meaningfully, are themselves duly rewarded.