

## ***Scaffolding* (Original Hebrew Title: *Pigumim*)**

### **Teacher Resource Package**

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#### **Synopsis**

Country of Origin: Israel

Release Year: 2017

Director: Matan Yair

Runtime: 90 minutes

Language: Hebrew

Themes: father-son relationships, inspirational teachers, coming of age, character and identity, education.

17-year-old Asher has always been the impulsive troublemaker, from primary school, all through junior high and high school. It's hard for him to concentrate in class, and he is prone to fits of rage and violence; yet he is also endowed with a considerable amount of charm and street wisdom. While his strict father sees him as a natural successor to the family's scaffolding business, Asher finds a different masculine role model in his gentle literature teacher Rami and forges a special connection with him. Torn between the two worlds, Asher looks for a chance for a new life and new identity. When a sudden tragedy occurs, he has to take the ultimate test of maturity.

#### **Curriculum Links**

*Scaffolding* can be used to meet the English and Media Studies component of the English curriculum from Grades 10-12. It can also be used for Grade 11 Designing Your Future, Grade 11 Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology, Grade 11 Dynamics of Human Relationships, Grade 11 Equity, Diversity and Social Justice and Grade 12 Working with School Age Children and Adolescents.

### **Context: Fact or Fiction?**

Although the film is a work of fiction in terms of the storyline, the character of the teacher and his troubled student are based on the director who is teacher and one of his former students. The character of Asher Lax is played by...Asher Lax, a non-professional actor whose father owns a scaffolding business. Nevertheless, in an interview with the newspaper The Jerusalem Post, director Matan Yair insists that the film is not a biography of Lax's life:

“There were many scenes he had to act that he had never lived through,” said Yair. In one key scene, for example, “He had to shout at the teacher’s wife, he had to talk about his emotions. I was very confident he could deliver. The first task of the director is bring out the wave of emotions the character is going through... I used the way he speaks, the way he moves, which is so mesmerizing. The audience is drawn to him. Yes, the story is based on his life and built around him. But he was acting.” (<http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Culture/Israeli-director-Matan-Yairs-very-personal-film-Scaffolding-515816>)

Similarly the other students in the class were played by non-professional actors who had also been students in director Yair’s class. This lends the film an air of authenticity that is missing in many other films that revolve around a classroom setting.

Yair also shot the film on the grounds of the school where he taught in a working class suburb outside Tel Aviv where most of the students are from a Sephardic background – i.e. Jews from Arabic and North African countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. Most of these students are descended from families that moved to Israel in the 1950s and did not fit into the dominant Ashkenazi population who were descended from Eastern and Central Europe. As a result, they faced cultural and employment discrimination that narrowed their opportunities for success. This social divide between Sephardim and Ashkenazim is apparent in Asher’s remedial class that is made up primarily of Sephardic students who have been streamed into a vocational rather than an academic path and are neither encouraged nor expected to continue with their studies after graduating high school.

### **Focus Questions**

1. Why do you think the director chose Asher Lax to be the focus of the film over other students?
2. How does the school depicted in the film compare to Canadian schools? What similarities and differences can you list in terms of both the student and staff bodies?

## **Theme: Father-Son Relationship**

Asher's relationship with his father Milo and the conflict that results when Asher finds a different role model is at the centre of the film. Until he meets Rami, Asher idolises his father and obeys him unquestioningly. An ex-con with a quick temper, he is not above slapping his son when he thinks he has done something wrong and Asher has inherited both his anger management issues and a propensity to violence when things don't go his way. Women are noticeably absent in their world and while Asher's attitude to women is shaped by his father's nasty comments about his mother and the wife-from-hell jokes he is prone to telling. Not surprisingly, Asher is generally disrespectful to the female staff with whom he interacts.

Though Milo exerts control over Asher, he is also dependent on him, especially after his heart surgery. He makes it clear that Asher's high school exams take second place to taking care of him after he comes home from the hospital and he berates Asher for studying on the job which he sees as "slacking off." Asher is Milo's legacy and to that end, he is expected to take over Milo's scaffolding business one day. Asher's education is thus irrelevant to his future and Milo ridicules Asher's interest in his literature class, insisting that literature is dead.

When Rami enters Asher's life, he provides him with a different kind of father figure, one that is diametrically opposed to Milo. Rather than quash any intellectual curiosity in Asher, he nurtures it. Where Milo is quick to anger, Rami seems to have an infinite amount of patience. Moreover, through the "questions for my father" assignment, Rami encourages Asher to see his father as a flawed human being rather than an all-powerful patriarch. It is important to note that Asher gives the questions to Rami before he actually presents them to his father. To him, the list of questions is a means of seeking approval from Rami who represents a different kind of father figure to him.

If Rami temporarily feels like a kinder, more accepting father, his suicide proves to be the ultimate act of betrayal. Milo may be a tyrant, but he is a steady and reliable presence in Asher's life. In killing himself, Rami has abandoned Asher, leaving him with unanswerable questions. This is why Asher is so focussed on whether or not Rami had left a note. When he breaks into apartment and finds it, his reaction is anger rather than sympathy. Arguing that Rami "didn't have the guts to live," Asher deflects his disappointment in letting Rami down by failing the final exam into anger towards him for not being there when he needed him most.

By the end of the film, Asher has failed his matriculation exam but he has learned a valuable lesson that has rendered him more mature. It is at this point that he is able to direct his homework questions to where they rightfully belong: at his father.

### **Focus Questions**

1. Do you think that Rami is a bad father? Why/not? Provide specific examples from the film.
2. What are the questions that Asher asks his father at the end of the film? Why do you think that this is what he chooses to ask?
3. The film ends with Asher and his father looking at each other. What do you think each of them is thinking?
4. What do you think that Asher will do with his future? Should he take over his father's business? Why/why not?

## Extension Activity

Central to the film is the homework task that Asher overhears Rami give to his other class, “questions for my father.” This assignment is based on a real project by Karl Haendel, an American artist whose list of questions for his father became the basis for a painting he exhibited first in 2007 at his New York gallery, Harris Lieberman, and then, in 2010, at the Guggenheim Museum. Later that year, Haendel collaborated with a filmmaker colleague, Petter Ringbom on a film based on the original piece. In this 11-minute film, the images of 18 different men are projected onto a screen, each of home addresses their own questions to their respective fathers. Students could find out more about the project by going to the website at <http://www.questionsformyfather.com/preview.html>.

## Questions

1. What is the rationale behind this project?
2. Why was it important to include a range of men of different ages and ethnicities?
3. Devise your own list of questions.
4. Devise a similar project with girls and women asking questions for their mothers. How do the questions differ? What do you think this says about how identity is constructed?

## Theme: Character and Identity

*Scaffolding* is a film that explores identity from a variety of perspectives. As Asher is on the cusp of adulthood, he grapples with competing forces that vie to shape the kind of man he will be. On the one hand, there is his father and the world of physical labour that his scaffolding business represents, and on the other, there is Rami and the high school environment that introduces Asher to challenges of an intellectual kind for the first time. Within these two environments there are also subgroups that influence how identity is constructed according to the groups that people belong to, such as sporting allegiances, religion, ethnic identity and gender.

## Focus Questions:

1. How does being put in a remedial class influence the behaviour of the students within the school? How do they relate to the other students? How do others relate to them? How does the staff relate to the remedial class?
2. What sport do Asher and his friends identify with? How are different sporting allegiances identified with race and class?
3. What different models of masculinity are offered to Asher during the course of the film?
4. How does Asher relate to Judaism and religious practice? How does a person’s religious affiliation shape their identity and the way others relate to them?
5. To what extent are groups with similar interests (e.g. student body, staff body) united and divided by significant events such as Rami’s suicide?
6. How does your educational environment help to shape your identity?
7. What other factors help to shape your identity?
8. How do males and females in Canadian society learn what it means to be masculine or feminine? How or why might this differ depending on their racial, ethnocultural or class background?

## **Theme: Debate and Conflict**

The lines between teacher and student are less clearly defined in Rami's classroom than in more traditional classes. Students refer to him by his first name and no topic is off limits, including some very personal questions that the students direct at him. Occasionally, what starts out as discussion morphs into argument and threatens to spiral out of control. Rami understands the academic and social challenges that his students face and is thus willing to tolerate what some other teachers would consider to be disrespectful behaviour. He is every bit as interested in teaching them about life beyond that classroom as he is in teaching literature, and he encourages his students to read the newspaper and travel overseas in order to expand their range of thinking and experience. He also challenges them to take on responsibility within the school by asking them to take on the task of organizing the Memorial Day assembly for the school. This idea causes conflict not just amongst the students in Rami's class, but also between Rami and the administration that has decidedly much less confidence in Rami's students than Rami does. The classroom in this film thus functions as a microcosm for society at large and the challenges that Asher and his fellow students will face once their formal education has ended.

### **Focus Questions**

1. What are the conflicts that emerge amongst the students themselves in the classroom? How are they resolved?
2. What are the conflicts that occur between Rami and Asher and between Rami and the other students in the class?
3. How does Rami's idea to allow his remedial students to organize the Memorial Day assembly come into conflict with the administration's plans? What does this say about the administration's attitude towards the class and to Rami as a teacher?
4. How does the class relate to the teacher who replaces Rami? How does she relate to them? What are the implications of those different teaching styles for the students?
5. To what extent do the conflicts in the film relate to individual personalities? What other factors come into play in these situations?

## **Theme: Education**

Through the relationship between Rami and his class (an Asher in particular), *Scaffolding* examines the role that education plays in shaping the futures of young adults. While Rami tries to empower his students, the educational system as a whole seems to work against his efforts. Moreover, the students themselves question the relevance of formal education to their daily lives, making his job that much harder. The concept of formal and informal education in the context of the film is one that lends itself to further classroom exploration.

### **Focus Questions**

1. What is the difference between formal and informal learning? Provide examples of both from the film.
2. Do you think that Rami's influence will have a lasting impact on Asher? Why/why not? Provide evidence from the film to support your answer.
3. How much of Asher's future do you think will be shaped by his school experience and how much will be shaped by his relationship with his father?

4. How does the administration handle Rami's suicide? Do you think they dealt with it effectively with the students? Why/why not?

### **Extension Question:**

How much of a role does an educational establishment play in shaping a person's future? Does a person's ability to achieve success depend entirely on his/her own motivation and ability or do other factors influence a person's potential? If so, what are they? Discuss.

### **Context: Genre Study**

*Scaffolding* focuses on one individual teacher who made a meaningful impact in the lives of his students. There are many other examples of films, both fictional and documentary, that deal with inspirational teachers. Listed below are some examples:

*Blackboard Jungle* (1955)

*To Sir with Love* (1967)

*Stand and Deliver* (1988)

*Lean on Me* (1989)

*Dead Poet's Society* (1989)

*Dangerous Minds* (1995)

*Music of the Heart* (1999)

*Freedom Writers* (2007)

*The Great Debaters* (2007)

Students should choose one other film about an inspirational teacher and compare it with *Scaffolding*, considering the following questions:

1. What do the films have in common? How are they different?
2. What are some of the personality traits that make a teacher inspirational?
3. How realistic are the films? Would those based on true stories be better if they were done as documentaries? Why/why not?
4. What tactics do the teachers use to persuade disinterested students to become involved in their studies?
5. How are these dedicated teachers regarded by their co-workers?
6. How do the students affect the lives of the teachers portrayed in these films?
7. Why do you think that the topic of inspirational teachers continues to be a popular subject for filmmakers today?

### **Scaffolding: General Questions/Activities**

1. In addition to Karl Haendel's questions for my father, the two other texts that are referenced in the film are *Antigone* and the Chekhov short story, *The Lament*. What are some of the themes in those texts and how do they relate to themes in *Scaffolding*?
2. There are very few female characters in the film. How does Asher relate to women? Provide specific examples.
3. One of the students tells Asher that parents complained because Rami did not focus enough on exams. Do you think that this makes Rami a bad teacher? Why/why not? What are the qualities of a good teacher? How much emphasis should be put on grades in order to determine success?
4. Asher's father tells him that literature is dead and is not worth studying. Why do we still study literature? What does it have to offer?
5. Why does the principal decide against including Rami in the graduating class photo? Was this the right decision? Why/why not?
6. Asher's father has little patience for his formal education. How important is parental support and involvement in a student's ability to achieve? Provide evidence to support your response.
7. Why is it so important for Asher to find Rami's suicide note? What is his reaction when he does find it?
8. Was the examiner right to fail Asher because he got some of the details of the Chekhov story wrong? Why/why not? What do you think the consequences of failing the exam and not graduating will be for Asher?
9. Who do you think will have a greater influence on Asher's future – his father or Rami? Why do you think this way? Provide evidence from the film to support your answer.
10. Interview a teacher at your school. What made them decide to become a teacher? What are their greatest challenges? What gives them most satisfaction?

### **Further Reading**

Interviews with director Matan Yair:

Cineuropa

<http://cineuropa.org/it.aspx?t=interview&l=en&did=334230>

The World of Apu

<http://theworldofapu.com/interview-with-matan-yair/>