

STUDENT GUIDE

A VISIT TO MOSCOW

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Overview: In 1965, an American rabbi travels to the Soviet Union to investigate reports of persecution of the Jewish community. The Soviet government welcomes him as a guest—but provides a strict schedule he and the rest of his group of rabbis must follow. One afternoon, the rabbi slips away. With an address in hand and almost no knowledge of the Russian language, he embarks on a secret journey that will change his life forever. Inspired by the true experience of Rabbi Rafael Grossman, *A Visit to Moscow*, an Eisner-nominated graphic novel, captures the formidable perseverance and strength of the Jewish people during an overlooked era when a different type of Holocaust, a spiritual Holocaust, was happening in the USSR.

NOTABLE CHARACTERS

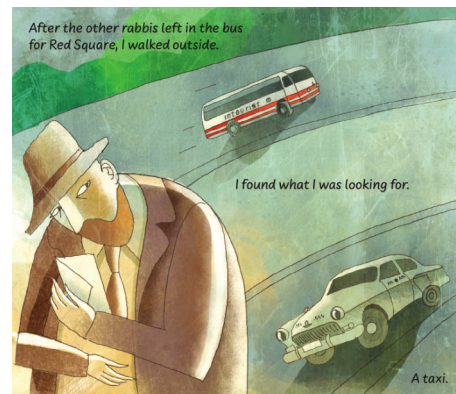
- The Rabbi
- Meyer Gurwitz
- Zev Gurwitz (Meyer's brother)
- Bela Gurwitz (Meyer's sister)
- Zev Gurwitz (Meyer's son)

KEY THEMES

- Jewish Identity
- Religious oppression
- Religion in the Soviet Union
- Parenthood in dangerous and oppressive regimes
- Sacrificing and standing up for ideals
- The Holocaust and its echoes through the 20th century

IMPORTANT SETTINGS

- Northern Israel: Hula Valley
- Moscow: Metropol Hotel
- Moscow: Meyer Gurwitz's apartment



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Rather than opening directly with the Rabbi's arrival in Moscow, the book opens and closes with Zev's dreamlike, enigmatic vision. Why do you think the author chose to bookend the story with these sequences? From whose perspective or perspectives are we experiencing this story?
2. In what ways does Meyer Gurwitz make sacrifices for his ideals? In what ways does the Rabbi risk his own safety for his ideals?
3. What are the things and/or ideals in your life that are important enough to make sacrifices for? These sacrifices do not have to be on the same scale as what we see in the book; they can be smaller yet significant in the context of your life.
4. What do you think is the main theme (or themes) of this book? Pick out two to three quotes that illustrate the theme you have identified.
5. Building off question 4, select two to three panels or pages that illustrate the theme you have identified.
6. Why is Meyer Gurwitz reluctant to reveal his identity to the Rabbi? Why does he remain suspicious after the Rabbi speaks to him in Yiddish? And what does he mean by the question, "What do you know about hiding?"
7. When the Rabbi enters the Gurwitz's apartment, the colors change from cold browns and grays to warm reds and oranges. What do you think this visual change might signify?
8. Why does Meyer Gurwitz make the decision to raise his child in hiding and relative isolation? Do you think you would do the same in his circumstances?
9. How does the Russian official speak to the Gurwitz family when delivering their visas, and what does this suggest about how Jewish people were viewed and treated by the Soviet government at the time?
10. As Zev travels from Moscow to Israel, we see an impressionistic "memory" of the rest of his life to come. What conclusions can be drawn about his life from this sequence?
11. What do you think is the meaning of the line, "He remembers being alive was like being in heaven?"
12. The epigraph of *A Visit to Moscow* comes from the Talmudic tractate *Mishnah Sanhedrin*: "Whoever saves a single life is considered to have saved the whole world." Why do you think this epigraph was chosen for

A Visit to Moscow? How does it apply to the story?

ACTIVITY IDEAS

1. What do you know about Communism in the Soviet Union particularly in regard to how different faiths - and religion in general - were regarded by the state? Write two-three paragraphs about what you already know and what suppositions you would make after reading *A Visit to Moscow*. Now do some research on the subject, finding at least three articles (preferably in encyclopedias, journals, or other reputable sources). Write two-three paragraphs about what you learned: what was as you expected, what surprised you, and why?
2. The story of *A Visit to Moscow* is drawn from a real experience that took place over fifty years ago in the life of Rabbi Rafael Grossman. Think about any old family stories you may have heard, either from your own family or from a friend's. Write out the story as a narrative or draw a short comic based on the story. Then answer these questions: who is involved in this story, when does this take place, and what does this story suggest about the personalities of the people involved and their relationship to how society operated at that time?

3. The characters in *A Visit to Moscow* are affected by institutions largely outside their control: religion and government. What larger institutions have the most impact on your life and the lives of your friends and family? To what degree do you have any influence or control over those institutions? Examples include school, work, government, religion, and social customs. Write a 1-2 page paper or draw a short comic on this subject, focusing especially on ways in which you have (or don't have) a say in how these institutions function currently, and considering the question: what would it take for these institutions to change?



TEACHER'S KEY

Reading/Interest Level:

Ages 12+/Grades 7+

Common Core Aligned Pre-Reading

Key Ideas and Details

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.1

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.2

Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. It is helpful to have students reflect about their takeaways and what they see as the main ideas/central themes before formally introducing them.

- Have students do a free write (e.g., mind map) about the ideas or themes of *A Visit to Moscow* that impacted them. Encourage them to generate ideas without editing.
- Have students review their free-writing and come up with one word they feel encapsulates the theme of the book.
- Have students pick 2-3 specific panels, images, or pieces of dialogue that represent their identified word.

- Have students pair up with other students to share their words and examples.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.3 - Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

A Visit to Moscow is a fairly simple story that nonetheless contains intense emotions, echoes of the world-changing horrors of the 20th century, and transcendent mysteries. Either as an individual project or in groups, ask students to determine the following:

- What are the primary motivations of each of the characters?
- What are the major choices they make in the story?
- What beliefs or needs influence those choices?
- Who or what is the primary antagonist in the story?
- What is the meaning of the story's enigmatic ending?

All points should cite examples from the text. Students could complete this project either as a presentation or as a short paper.

Craft and Structure

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6

Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

The visual style of *A Visit to Moscow* is vividly expressionistic, less concerned with realism than with using form and color to convey emotion and mood. Either as an individual or in groups, ask students to pick 2-3 pages or events from the text and answer the following:

- From whose point of view are we seeing the story in this sequence/these sequences?
- How would you describe the art style in this sequence/these sequences? What kind of colors/shapes are prevalent? What do these artistic choices suggest about the atmosphere of the scene, and/or how the characters are feeling?
- What do these aesthetic decisions bring to the experience of reading *A Visit to Moscow* that would be missing if a more realistic style had been used?

All points should cite examples from the text. Students could complete this project either as a presentation or as a short paper.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.7

Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.8

Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information while avoiding plagiarism.

It is important for students to understand that issues of persecution, religious and otherwise, are not just past events in historical narratives. Have students engage with age-appropriate contemporary examples. This could include:

- Preparing a “case study” of current news stories on a group experiencing persecution.
- Researching and preparing a short paper or presentation on the treatment of Jews in Russia today.
- Researching other examples of contemporary persecution and preparing a short research paper or presentation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.9

Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

A Visit to Moscow connects with two of the most significant events of the 20th Century: Soviet antisemitism and the Holocaust. Students should complete a research project on one of the following subjects:

- The treatment of Jewish people in the Soviet Union, in terms of both official government policy and daily urban and rural life. Compare and contrast with Jewish life in contemporary Russia.
- The experience of Holocaust survivors after the war, finding new lives and new communities after unspeakable horror and tragedy. (This can be a general historical overview or can focus on 3-4 individual figures.) Compare and contrast the lives of survivors in the Soviet Union with survivors in Western Europe and America.

Students must complete all original research using verifiable sources. Sources must be cited appropriately and a bibliography provided. This can be an individual or group project and can take the form of a paper or presentation.

RECOMMENDED TITLES FOR FURTHER READING

- *Maus: A Survivor's Tale-My Father Bleeds History* by Art Spiegelman. Pantheon Graphic Library, 1996.
- *The Unfinished Corner* by Dani Colman and Rachel "Tuna" Petrovicz. Wonderbound, 2021.
- *Anne Frank's Diary: The Graphic Adaptation* by Anne Frank and David David Polonsky. Pantheon Graphic Library, 2018.
- *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, Pantheon, 2004.
- *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir* by Thi Bui, Abrams ComicArts, 2017.

