

UNSPOKEN

Discussion Guide

INTRODUCTION:

The goal of *Unspoken* is to highlight the pain and isolation of closeted members of religious communities, and specifically that of LGBTQ Orthodox children. The film does so in several ways:

Firstly, there is purposely no mention of controversial topics like *halacha*, marriage, or *shul* inclusion. Noam's story is simply presented in terms of his struggle, to indicate the need for community members and loved ones to help keep closeted children safe. Secondly, the film demonstrates that despite Noam's numerous friends and family members, he still struggles to find one person he can trust. Without any outspoken support, Noam's assumption is that he has no one to confide in. Third, the story includes an element of LGBTQ Holocaust education as a point of comparison. This allows viewers to embrace the idea of being persecuted for how one was born (both Jewish or LGBTQ), and also compares the way LGBTQ stories continue to be hidden within the context of Jewish learning. All three of these elements are meant to foster nuanced conversation about inclusion in our religious communities in a way that prioritizes the safety of LGBTQ members.

For some viewers it may be their first time approaching the topic of LGBTQ identities, while for others it may be a more familiar topic. It's important to set the discussion within a context of listening and empathy for all viewers. Those who are new to the subject may not know specific language to use, and must be encouraged to speak openly from a place of wanting to learn. Others who are familiar with the subject may have specific sensitivities, and should be encouraged to share from personal experience or understanding. While the questions below offer suggestions for where to lead the conversation, it can also be important to let new questions arise from group discussion as long as they come from a place of empathy and the desire to learn.

POTENTIAL QUESTIONS / TALKING POINTS:

1) *Unspoken*

The title *Unspoken* implies themes of ambiguity, secrecy, and the unknown. This applies not only to Noam's secret, but to every character in the film. When we don't acknowledge certain topics, the assumption is that it's not okay to speak about them.

Why do you think Noam's mother Michelle had such a strong reaction to hiding Opa's story?

What do you think Noam said to Miriam when he broke up with her? Do you think he told her the truth?

Do you think Noam's friend Zach was acting out of homophobia? Jealousy? Frustration?

2) "What would happen if me and my boyfriend were Orthodox?" — "I don't know, you wouldn't be."

Every comment made to Noam has a significant affect on him, whether big or small. This passing line from Miriam has much bigger implications for Noam than she might have intended.

Why does this comment make Noam shut down?

What other moments in the film make Noam shut down or open up?

Are there moments you can think of in your own life when someone else's language had a significant effect on you?

3) "This could be you one day soon."

It is common in our Orthodox community to wish *simcha* and marriage upon our friends and family, even from a very young age. When Noam's mother says this phrase to him at his sister's wedding, it has the opposite effect of creating hope.

Why does this comment deepen Noam's pain?

Do we think Noam's mother is aware of his sexual orientation when she says this?

Why does this comment contrast so greatly to Noam's sister's *bracha*?

4) "Whoever they may be."

Part of the pain of closeted LGBTQ children is the inability to imagine a future for themselves. This can be extra sensitive at weddings or other *smachot*, when one would be confronted with the lack of marriage or children in their future. For many, this can lead to dangerous thoughts or even self-harm.

Why does Tali's wedding *bracha* have such a significant impact on Noam?

Why is this moment depicted as Noam's lowest point in the movie?

Is it possible to have a future in the Orthodox community without a spouse or children?

5) "In our entire school history, we have never once talked about Roma or gay people in the Holocaust."

When Noam first begins to look into Opa's past, he is met with resistance around the topic of LGBTQ victims of the Holocaust. The topic was taboo for decades after the end of World War II, and is still taboo in many circles today.

Have any of you previously learned about LGBT victims of the Holocaust?

Why do you think there is resistance to discussing LGBT victims of the Holocaust?

What does it mean for the Holocaust to be a "Jewish story?"

6) "There were gay men that were liberated from concentration camps and then put straight back into jail to continue the rest of their sentences."

Noam and Jonah's search for Opa's identity uncovers many shocking facts about the Nazi's persecution of LGBTQ victims. For Jonah, his search highlights the lack of sympathy in his community for other persecuted groups. For Noam, his search highlights a history that is relevant to his own story.

Why do you think the filmmakers included WWII research in Noam's story?

Why might the experience of learning this history feel differently for Noam?

What is our role as a Jewish community in learning about other stories of persecution?

7) "Heinrich was no *faygle*."

At the end of the film, Noam is devastated to discover that his Opa was not gay. The search for M's identity was not an intellectual one like it was for Jonah. Rather, Noam was searching for validation, hoping that his Opa might have been struggling like him.

What does Meyer's reaction indicate about his assumption of Noam's sexuality?

Why does Noam need to excuse himself before showing any pain or tears?

How do you think Noam's story would have changed if Opa was in fact gay?

8) "Please, just don't tell anyone about this."

When Noam kisses Jonah, he is hoping for one last chance of safety. Jonah's rejection is less a romantic one for Noam, and more a rejection of connection and trust. Upon Jonah's rejection, Noam immediately becomes isolated again.

Why do you think Noam becomes so afraid of Jonah?

How do you feel about Jonah's reaction?

What do you think would happen to a Noam in your community if he was outed as gay?

9) "Someone To Watch Over Me"

The lyrics to the thematic song in the film imply connection and comfort, and are sung by Noam in the original gender orientation. Noam could be singing about his Opa, about Jonah, or even about God.

How does the meaning of this song change for Noam from the beginning of the film to the end of the film?

Why was it so important for Noam to identify his grandfather as gay?

Do you think when Noam came out to Kyle, the choir boy, it helped him feel less alone?

10) "I chose this topic because of the way we ignore the homophobia that exists in our history, and because of the way it still remains a problem for gay people in our community today."

Even though Noam is too scared to speak with Jonah at the end of the film, Jonah still makes the effort to present the topic of LGBTQ research to his class. Jonah stands up for Noam at a time when Noam isn't able to speak up for himself.

What can we do to create a school culture that would allow kids like Noam to not feel that they have to leave so much "Unspoken"?

Do you think you would treat anyone differently after seeing this movie?

Which scene was most poignant / powerful / painful / real for you?

CONCLUSION:

While it's important to allow space for questioning, it is also important to allow space for safety. The main goal in starting these conversations with students, parents, and faculty is to acknowledge the struggles of closeted children. We want to counter the isolation and pain experienced by these children, which is an issue entirely separate from *halacha*, personal opinions, and individual life choices. There are many resources available to Orthodox children and adults struggling with their sexuality, and the options below are a few that would be helpful to share with the group:

Eshel - An organization dedicated to the inclusivity of Orthodox LGBTQ people and allies, including events for family members and parents of LGBTQ children.

JQ Helpline - A confidential phone or email contact with trained professionals dedicated to serving LGBTQ+ Jews.

JQY Drop-In - A safe space in Manhattan for LGBTQ Jewish youth to find licensed social workers, health resources, kosher food, and support groups.