



The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education  
The Seidman Educational Resource Center



## SAMPLE LESSON PLAN

### Two American Jewish Heroes Exemplifying *Nedivut* – Generosity, Past and Present: Rebecca Gratz and Aaron Feuerstein

by Sallie Olson

Coordinator of the Caplan LAB

#### GOALS:

1. Students will be inspired to perform personal acts of *nedivut*.
2. Students will learn about the roles of these two American heroes who, by example, expressed the *middah* (Jewish value) of *nedivut* (generosity).
3. Students will understand and appreciate the contributions of two American Jewish heroes, Rebecca Gratz and Aaron Feuerstein.

#### INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES:

After analyzing the biographical data of Rebecca Gratz and Aaron Feuerstein students will be able to:

1. Detail the experiences that shaped their characters and their values.
2. Describe the importance of their individual contributions in terms of their acts of *nedivut*.
3. Compare and contrast their contributions, Jewish and secular, to the society of their respective times.

#### KEY CONCEPTS – TEACHING POINTS:

##### A. Rebecca Gratz

1. She established the first Jewish Sunday School in America in 1838.
2. She was a wealthy woman who devoted her life to those in need.
3. She established organizations that gave necessities to both Jews and non-Jews.
4. She encouraged other wealthy people to also help the poor.

##### B. Aaron Feuerstein

1. He was the owner of three factories which were destroyed by fire in 1995.
2. He pledged to rebuild the factories, and paid wages and benefits to employees who could not work.
3. He is an Orthodox Jew who studies Talmud, and says its teachings helped formulate his beliefs about how to act in the world.
4. He received letters and awards commending him for his generosity and compassion.

## BACKGROUND:

### Rebecca Gratz and Aaron Feuerstein – Who are they? What did they do?

#### Rebecca Gratz 1781-1869



On March 4, 1838 the first Jewish Sunday School in America opened in Philadelphia with 60 students. Children from the Philadelphia Jewish community could attend without paying a fee. The idea of a one-day-a-week religious school, where children could receive instruction in Judaism, was innovative and would have a lasting impact on the future of Jewish education.

Rebecca Gratz was the compassionate and generous woman who thought of the idea and organized The Hebrew Sunday School Society of Philadelphia. She was born in Philadelphia in 1781 into a wealthy family of merchants and civic leaders, and deserves to be remembered not only for who she was, but for what she achieved by her many acts of *nedivut*.

From the time she was a young woman Rebecca Gratz devoted her life to charitable causes, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and integrated her American experience and Jewish identity to establish the first American Jewish institutions run by women. In 1819, she organized and founded The Female Hebrew Benevolent Society, the first of these institutions. Wealthy Jewish women gave their money and their time to help poor Jewish women in the community. It is interesting to note that the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society is still very active today, in Philadelphia, and continues to provide help to poor Jewish women.

Rebecca Gratz showed concern for people throughout her lifetime. She established organizations that provided clothing and fuel for poor families. Her concern for the many poor orphaned Jewish children in the United States and Canada, sent to Christian orphanages and denied a Jewish upbringing, resulted in the establishment of the first Jewish Foster Home in the United States, in 1855.

Rebecca Gratz's generosity extended to her own family as well. Although she never married, she raised the nine children of her sister, Rachel, who died in 1823. At the same time she was so involved in her charity and organizational works.

Rebecca Gratz, a devout Jewess, not only dedicated her life to the service of those in need, both Jewish and non-Jewish, but also encouraged others of wealth to do so. It is true Rebecca Gratz had the financial means and leisure time to perform the *mitzvot* of *tzedakah* (charity) and *gemilut hasadim* (deeds of loving-kindness). However, she went beyond the required *mitzvot* with her acts of generosity. She exemplifies the saying, "Among those who give *tzedakah*, there are four types of people...those who want to give and want others to give – they are saintly people." (*Pirke Avot* 5:15) Rebecca Gratz died in 1869. She was 88.

## Aaron Feuerstein 1925 –



On December 11, 1995 a fire raged in the mill town of Lawrence Mass., destroying three century-old factory buildings and putting almost 3000 employees out of work. Aaron Feuerstein, the third generation president and CEO of Malden Mills Industries vowed not only to rebuild the factories, but also to restore jobs – he pledged three months’ full pay and continued insurance benefits for every employee. Who is Aaron Feuerstein, and what prompted this unusual act of *nedivut*?

Aaron Feuerstein is an Orthodox Jew. He grew up in a family where Talmudic discussions around the dinner table helped formulate his beliefs about how to act in the world. “Judaism gives you a complete and thorough framework within which you and your family can live,” he explained when questioned about his decision to continue to pay wages and benefits while rebuilding his factories.

Mr. Feuerstein has received thousands of letters commending his compassion toward his employees and for saving the town from economic disaster. His moral and corporate responsibilities to his employees and community have earned the praise of employees, union officials, and businesses. Upon accepting an award from Arizona State University, Aaron Feuerstein quoted from the Bible, “Let the rich man not praise himself” (Jeremiah 9:22-23). He said he is overwhelmed by the sudden fame he received after the fire; what he did was merely his standard business practice – to take care of his employees.

Study of Jewish text is an important part of Mr. Feuerstein’s life. He especially enjoys reading, and memorizing, passages from *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers). Perhaps he received inspiration for his acts of generosity from this verse, “*Hillel omer, Al tifrosh min hatsibur*” – “Hillel said, “Do not separate yourself from the community” (*Pirke Avot* 2:5). Malden Mills, the textile plant which produces Polartec and Polarfleece, synthetic materials used in outdoor clothing, reopened twenty-one months after the fire. All the employees were rehired

Both Aaron Feuerstein and Rebecca Gratz had wealth and the inclination to perform the *mitzvot* of *tzedakah* and *gemilut hasadim* (deeds of charity and loving-kindness). However, both of these Jewish heroes, inspired by *nedivut*, went beyond the requirements of the *mitzvot*. They gave to their communities with open hands and generous hearts.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How are Rebecca Gratz and Aaron Feuerstein similar, and different, in their acts of generosity?
2. How do students feel about Rebecca Gratz?, Aaron Feuerstein? Are their contributions to Jewish life, and to society in general, important? Do students identify with one of them, both of them? Why?

### ACTIVITIES:

Select one or more of the following: Some of these activities are interchangeable (use Aaron Feuerstein instead of Rebecca Gratz in number 2, 3 or 4)

1. Students prepare a Comparison Chart. One section lists the lifestyle and contributions of Rebecca Gratz, another section lists the lifestyle and contributions of Aaron Feuerstein. Discuss the similarities and the differences.
2. Students play the game, "To Tell the Truth." Three contestants each claim to be Rebecca Gratz. The class determines the "real" Rebecca Gratz (selected by the teacher in advance) by asking questions.
3. Students play 20-pocket "Concentration Game," matching 10 pairs of facts/dates/personalities, etc. in the life of Rebecca Gratz.
4. Students demonstrate their understanding of Rebecca Gratz's contributions by making posters/banners depicting one of more expressions of her generosity.
5. Students learn the song, "A Kind, Kind Heart." (attached)
6. Students take turns pretending to be Aaron Feuerstein accepting an award for his acts of *nedivut*. What does he say?
7. Students create a class mural depicting the factory fire, and the successful rebuilding by Mr. Feuerstein. Add a brief description to the mural.
8. Students role-play a scene between Aaron Feuerstein and one of his employees, following the fire. What does Mr. Feuerstein say? What does the factory worker say?

**CLOSURE:**

1. Students take turns describing personal acts of *nedivut* they plan to do.
2. Students relate what they would say to Rebecca Gratz or Aaron Feuerstein if they met her or him walking down the street.

The Auerbach Central Agency for Jewish Education  
7607 Old York Road  
Melrose Park, PA 19027  
215-635-8940 Fax: 215-635-8946  
[www.acaie.org](http://www.acaie.org) [info@acaie.org](mailto:info@acaie.org)