

# BaBAGANewz

## *Ice Cream Town*

by Rona Arato

### Study Guide

#### I. Introduction

This study guide aims to provide material and ideas to aid in the preparation of a lesson, unit, or book club discussion about Rona Arato's *Ice Cream Town*. *Ice Cream Town*, an engaging historical fiction, transports the reader to the streets of New York's Lower East Side during the 1920s. The reader joins Sammy Levin and his sister, Malka, who reunite with their father in America and find this a world far different from the one they left in Poland. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the value *gevurah*, heroism, the theme of the Kislev 5769 issue of BABAGANEWZ.

Sammy enters a world of streets crowded with tenements teeming with people, pushcarts overflowing with fruit and vegetables, horses pulling milk wagons, men and women working and shopping, and children trying to put together a game of baseball amidst all of this activity. And within this new world, Sammy negotiates being a new Jewish immigrant, attempting to preserve his heritage and adapt to America. His efforts require him to consider what values he must hold dear. Facing internal and physical challenges, Sammy displays tremendous inner strength and bravery (*gevurah*) as he stands by his own resolve in the face of negative peer pressure. We see him draw upon his inner strength throughout the novel, and by the end, his *gevurah* not only allows him to reach new heights, but elevates others along with him.

Through relating Sammy's experiences, this novel is a story of the cultural clashes and integration that marked the immigrant experience, of the power of family and community, and of the ability of one man's actions to make a difference on so many others. *Ice Cream Town* not only lends insight into the past, but it also invites readers to recognize how the past shapes the present. And its predominant theme of human agency and *gevurah* will resonate with children and adults alike.

#### Questions for Study and Discussion

1. *Pirkei Avot* 4:1 explores the power of one's inner strength; our sages teach, "Who is strong? Someone who conquers his or her inclination." Sammy displays the trait of *gevurah*, of successfully overpowering his *yetzer hara* (inclination to sin or succumb to

negative peer pressure), in a number of interactions throughout *Ice Cream Town*. Describe some of the episodes where Sammy's *gevurah* triumphs.

Have you ever had to draw upon your own inner strength to do what you know is right? Describe your struggle and triumph!

2. The different members of Sammy's family react to life in the New World in very different ways. Their reactions represent the varying routes Jewish immigrants took as they adapted to life in America. Some held fast to their Jewish traditions despite the challenges this commitment posed. Others cast off the vestiges of their Jewish heritage to wholly embrace their new "American" identity. Using the individual members of Sammy's family as examples of the different approaches to integrating into America, explore the ways that Jewish immigrants adapted to life in the "New World."

3. When Sammy first reunites with his father, his father says, "It's time to go home." But New York does not yet feel like home to Sammy. As the story progresses, how do we see New York becoming more like home for Sammy? What makes a place a home?

4. On Sammy's first day of school, his father emphasizes the importance of getting a good education. Education is prized as a means of achieving true freedom and opportunity in America. Horace Mann, the first Secretary of Education, believed that education would cure most of society's ills and help foster equality. How would you describe education's role in our country? Has access to public education helped to rid our nation of inequality and crime? Consider the successes and challenges of our country's educational system.

5. Sammy has a beautiful singing voice, but when he first comes to America, he refuses to sing. Why does he initially resist singing in New York? What prompts Sammy to begin to sing again? Discuss the significance of Sammy's singing in the novel.

6. Why do you think this novel is entitled *Ice Cream Town*?

7. What images and items does Sammy associate with life in America? What do you view as symbolic of America?

8. Identify a turning point in Sammy's relationship with Herschel and the other members of his "street gang." What changes after this point? Have you ever had to make a big decision or a difficult choice? What was it and how did this moment affect your life and relationships?

9. What does Mr. Kempel's garden represent? Is there a special place in your life where you feel happy just by being there?

10. The end of the book leaves Sammy and his family at good places in their lives and prepared to face future challenges as they come. As Sammy's Aunt Tsippy says, their future is like the Williamsburg Bridge: "We will just have to cross it when we get there." What do you think will happen next for the different members of Sammy's family?

11. New immigrants' experiences were often marked by episodes of loss and moments of new gains, instances of confusion and discovery. Explore what Sammy and his family lost in the New World and what they found there, as well.

### Passages for Close Analysis

1. Page 58

*"It wasn't knowledge that Sammy wanted. It was power! And that, he knew from his wanderings around the Lower East Side, was not found in a schoolroom. It was found on the streets."*

Why do you think Sammy felt this way? How would you convince him that knowledge is the *true* source of power?

2. Page 87

*"This is America. Life is different here."*

*"Malka, this may be America, but if we give up our traditions, who are we?"*

This exchange between Malka and her father highlights the conflict that many Jewish immigrants faced when they came to America. Discuss the difficulty of this transition. Are there instances in your own life when you feel that you face similar conflicts?

3. Page 94

*"Do you know how precious books are? Books teach us about the world. They tell us stories."*

Why does Sammy's teacher emphasize this idea to him?

How would you describe the importance of books and the impact of reading?

4. Page 136

*"[Papa] told Sammy about how a small group of Jews fought off the whole Assyrian army that wanted to enslave them. Papa said the lesson of Chanukah was that every person can make a difference if they fight hard enough for what they believe."*

How do we see this lesson resonate with Sammy later in the novel? How does this lesson of Jew's *gevurah* over their enemies foreshadow Sammy's own act of personal bravery?

5. Page 203

*"New York might turn out to be the goldene medine after all."*

Why do you think Sammy feels this way now? How does he define “*goldene medine*,” golden country?

Do *you* think America is the golden land?

What do you think is America’s promise and what opportunities do you think America offers?

Throughout history, people have come to America to have a chance to live the “American Dream.” What do you think the American Dream is? What are *your* dreams for life in America?

## **Lesson Plans and Projects**

### **1. Create a newspaper that explores the social changes of the 1920s**

Life on the Lower East Side of New York during the early 1900s was a bustling place where many elements of American culture were burgeoning. We see this through the lens provided by the story of Sammy’s family. Sammy’s father is involved in the nascent union movement, Malka’s boyfriend is part of the growth of the big department store, Aunt Tsippy is exploring the world of women’s liberation, and Sammy himself is experiencing the American educational approach to helping new immigrants learn a new language and culture.

Divide the class into groups to research the various facets of the social change that takes place in America during the 1920s. Assign one change, as discussed above, to each group. Once they research their subject, students can transmit their knowledge by creating a newspaper from the 1920s. Each group will prepare an article with a picture and accompanying in-depth interview that brings light to the topic they have studied. For example, the group studying unionism in the early twentieth century will write an article about the rise of unions, their impact, and the public’s response. They can include a picture of a union protest or of a union organizer speaking before his fellow workers. Then they can include an interview with a union organizer or a person who is troubled by the rise of this kind of group. The groups studying the women’s liberation movement might explore the changes in women’s fashions and interview a leading reformer in this movement. (Remember women got the right to vote in 1920.)

Taking the newspaper project a step further, you could model your newspaper on one of the Jewish newspapers that were popular among the Jewish immigrants on the Lower East Side. Study the history of these newspapers, highlighting their social significance to the new immigrants. Then recreate a newspaper, in English—not Yiddish—incorporating the style and content of the newspapers of the 1920s. Include advertisements, editorials, news articles, and advice columns. This will not only allow students to develop a sense for what life was like at the time, but will also provide opportunities to experiment with a variety of writing styles and objectives.

### **2. Recreate the world of the Lower East Side**

Students can create a scale model of the Lower East Side with depictions of the inside of tenements and stores. Students might also enjoy creating a life-size replica of the Lower East Side in their classroom or school auditorium. Their models can be complete with pushcarts, tenements, the butcher shop, and horse drawn milk wagons. Students should recreate the inside of a tenement apartment and consider whether they include electrical appliances or not. Students can create a pushcart with the advertisements, products, and prices that might have been used in the 1920s.

### **3. Compose a song**

Singing plays an integral role in Sammy's life and the songs he sings touches the hearts of those around him. Research the songs that were treasured by Jewish communities and examine their significance. These songs often evoked feelings shared by many. In groups, students can work to compose a song that evokes the feelings of a recent Jewish immigrant, describing his or her impressions and experiences upon adjusting to life in the Lower East Side.

### **4. Show your dramatic side**

Students can write a script for a short play based on the characters and events of *Ice Cream Town*. Students should study the layout and features of a basic play, noting the inclusion of directions to actors and role of set and scenery. In crafting their scripts, students should consider methods for increasing dramatic tension and contemplate which parts of the book should be dramatized and which should not be included. Depending on available time, students can create scenery and even perform their play(s) for each other or other grades in the school.