

Jewish Dragons
Rabbi Gavriel Goldfeder

Subject Area: Torah and mythology

Multi-unit lesson plan

Target Age: Grades 4-5, 6-8

Objective: To stimulate a fascination with the many odd creatures that populate Torah literature.

Why did Harry Potter hit so hard? It certainly has a lot to do with the central characters – young, flawed, and adventurous like the reader. But it is also about kids' fascination with myth and mystery. The Jewish world should be paying attention – kids want to know more about witches and sorcery, dragons and uniforms, spells and magic. But is there anything in Judaism that speaks to these areas of interest? Do Jews have dragons?

We do – maybe. Isaiah 14:29 describes a fiery flying serpent. Is this the same as a dragon? Was there really such a thing? If not, what was Isaiah trying to describe? These are some of the questions we will be exploring.

We will explore Torah sources and discover how they describe some of these mythical creatures. We will try to piece together what they looked like from the descriptions, and we will draw them as well. We will compare our drawings to other artists' renderings of these creatures. And ultimately we will ask the question 'is this real?' We will spend time on that discussion – if it is not real, what does it symbolize? Kids of this age are just at the point where questions like these become relevant. And the discussions will help them understand some of the other stories and myths they encounter, like Harry Potter and Star Wars. If Darth Vader is not real, what does he represent?

Class number 1: Jewish Dragons

Text 1: Isaiah 14:29 “Do not rejoice, O Philistia, all of you, because the rod of him who struck you is broken; for out of the serpent's root shall come forth a viper, and his fruit shall be a fiery serpent.”

Questions: Is Mr. Fiery Serpent a nice guy? Who controls him?
What is he used for?

Text 2: Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 2:10:2 “Moses prevented the enemies, and took and led his army before those enemies were apprised

of his attacking them; for he did not march by the river, but by land, where he gave a wonderful demonstration of his sagacity. For when the ground was difficult to travel through, because of the multitude of serpents, which it produces in vast numbers, and which, indeed is singular in some of those creatures, which other countries do not breed, yet such as are worse than others in power and mischief, and with an unusual fierceness of sight; some of which ascend from the ground unseen, and also fly in the air, and so come upon men unawares and do them mischief.

Questions: How harmful are these flying serpents? Who controls them? What do they do?

Text 3: Numbers 21 – 'And the people complained about G-d and about Moses, saying, 'Why did you take us out of Egypt to die in the desert? For there is no food and no water. And we are tired of this withering bread.' And G-d sent the fiery serpents against them, and they bit them, and many died from Israel. And the people said to Moshe, 'We have sinned against G-d and against you! Please pray to G-d that he will take away these serpents from us.' And Moses prayed. And G-d said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent and put it on a pole. And anyone who is bit will see it, and live.'

Questions: Who controls these serpents? How harmful are they? What is the 'cure' for them?

Activity: Compare this with dragons from other cultures:

There are nine types of Chinese dragons, also regarded as the Oriental Dragons. You should also note that nine is a very lucky number to the Chinese. These are: the horned dragon, the celestial dragon, the spiritual dragon, the winged dragon, the dragon of hidden treasures, the coiling dragon, the yellow dragon, and the dragon king. Each of these dragon types has a special attribute to them.

The **Horned dragon** is also known as **Lung**. They are the most powerful of the Oriental Dragons and are completely deaf. They have the power to produce rain, too. It should also be noted that the head points South, and the tail points North. In addition, they are a symbol of the East and the sun.

The **Celestial dragon** protects the mansions of the gods to the Chinese, and the **Spiritual dragon** creates rain and wind for mankind. The **Dragon of Hidden Treasures** helps keep watch over concealed wealth, and the **coiling dragon** lives in the water, primarily lakes and deep,

deep waters. The **yellow dragon** is especially important, for this dragon emerged from water and aided the Emperor Fu Shi by showing him writing.

The **Dragon King** is really four dragons, and these dragons keep watch over the four main seas. They were honored and respected, for they were the ones the Chinese went to if there was little or no rain. The four lived in the North, South, East, or West waters.

Harry Potter's dragons- **Antipodean Opaleye** is considered the most beautiful species of **dragon**. It is born in **New Zealand** but usually immigrates to **Australia** when the geographic and climatic conditions harm their survival. It has medium size, weight between two and three tons; its eyes are of multiple colors. Regarding his feeding habits, it never kills human beings. Its favorite food is the ewe. Their eggs are of a pale gray.

Chinese Fireball, also known like **Liondragon**, is the only **Eastern dragon**. With scarlet color and smooth grudges, it has golden points around its face and protuberances around the eyes. It weights between two and four tons. Their eggs are golden, and their rinds are considered for the use of **Chinese wizards**. **Chinese Fireball** is a wild species, although tolerant to other creatures and persons.

The Welsh Green Dragon is almost an exclusive dragon found in **Wales**. It is a **dragon** that avoids the proximity of human beings. It has a melodic roar and breathes fire, and their eggs are brown with green specks.

Discussion 1: How are Jewish dragons different from dragons of other cultures? How are they the same?

Discussion 2: Are dragons 'real'? How do you know? If they are not 'real', what do they symbolize? Do they symbolize the same thing in different cultures?

Activity: Draw what you think the Jewish dragon looks like. Then compare with pictures of other dragons (attached).

Lesson 2: Giants

Texts 1: Read Samuel I 17:4-7

Question: A cubit is about 17.5 inches. How tall was Goliath?

Text 2: Og, the king of Bashan, remained from the rest of the Refaim-

giants. Behold his crib was made of iron. It is nine cubits in length, and four cubits in width, by the cubits of a man.

Question: If Og was this bog as a baby, how big would he be as an adult?

Text 3: Regarding the rock that Og wanted to throw on Israel, there is a received tradition: Og said, how large is the encampment of Israel – three parsangs square (enough to hold about 2,000,000 people)? I will uproot a mountain of three parsangs square and throw it upon them and kill them. He went and lifted a mountain three parsangs square and carried it on his head toward the encampment of Israel. The Holy One brought locusts which ate a hole through the middle of the mountain, and it sank down onto Og's neck. When he sought to remove it, his teeth extended to both sides and prevented him from lifting it up. How tall was Moses? 10 cubits. He took in his hand an axe that measured 10 cubits, and jumped 10 cubits, struck Og in the ankle and killed him.'

Question: How high was Og's ankle? How tall would the rest of his body have been (how will you figure that out?)

Discussion: Could someone really be this tall? If not, what were the rabbis trying to tell us by describing him this way? What in your life feels 'giant'? What would you feel about this giant? What did Moses feel? Are big things and people always the most dangerous?

Activity: Draw Og or Goliath in comparison to you and your family. Compare to pictures of giants.

Lesson 3: Dwarfs

Text 1: Avitul the Scribe said in the name of Rav: 'The Pharaoh of Moses' days was a cubit (17.5 inches) tall. He was exceedingly ugly, and he was a cubit and a span, and he had a great beard that reached down to the soles of his feet.

Text 2: Avitul the Scribe brought the verse: 'G-d rules over the kingdom of men, and He appoints the lowest of men over it. Some say this refers to Nevuchadnezzar (an evil tyrant who rules over the Jews in Babylonia) who was a dwarf, a hand-breadth (3 inches) in size.'

Nevuchadnezzar called the tribe of Levi and said 'Prepare yourselves! Before you eat and drink, I request that you stand and pluck your harps before me, as you did in your Temple for your G-d.' They looked at each

other and said, 'Is it not enough that our Temple has been destroyed, but now we have to stand and pluck our harps before this dwarf?'

Text 3: Maharal of Prague: 'Everything the rabbis said about Pharaoh is about his inner essence. Form that perspective, he was worthy of being in such a form, but the restrictions of the form of the human species prevented it, for everyone is created within the framework of the laws of nature, which render it impossible for a person to be so small.

Discussion: Were Pharaoh and Nevuchadnezzar really only a foot tall, or less? Why do the rabbis describe them that way? What are they trying to tell us about these men? Can someone be 'big' and 'small' at the same time? Can someone be 'small' and 'big' at the same time?

Activity: Draw two kinds of small – good small and bad small. Compare to pictures of dwarfs.

There are more classes to be drawn out from this model. Other interesting topics include angels, Leviathan, phoenix, and behemoth. Rabbi Natan Slifkin's Sacred Monsters is a good resource for gathering material.

To stimulate a fascination with the many odd creatures that populate Torah literature. Students will think that the Torah is as cool as anything else they are reading – Harry Potter, Rangers series, and the like. The objective, really, is simply to show kids who are spending a lot of time reading fantasy books that Torah has fantasy books, too. As a rabbi, I am interested in avoiding the trap that kids fall into quite often – 'Torah is boring; what I am reading is interesting.'

It also stimulates creative and critical thinking. The 'is this real' conversation can open up much deeper conversations about how 'Torah' and 'real' fit together, what 'real' actually means, and whether something can be real (like many of our myths) without having historicity. This may sound like a small thing, but it is essential as kids start to piece together their worldview that they have a proper and mature understanding of how Jewish myth fits into it.

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The way I teach this is as follows: I come to class already quite familiar with the texts I will introduce. I have read through them, and am also quite aware of how these creatures are related to in other cultures as well as in other forms of literature – i.e. if we are doing dragons, I know a bit about Harry Potter's dragons.

Read the text out loud, and then start asking questions – how does this creature sound? What do you think he looks like/ what do you think he does/ why do you think he does it?

After some discussion of all the texts, ask a more thematic question: is this real? And if not, what does it represent? This will lead to a discussion. Have an answer to the question for yourself: i.e. dragons fly between heaven and earth and do what is required. They are like messengers from above.

Then abstract this and talk about it as a topic: What do we have today that stands between heaven and earth? Does it do the same thing that dragons do?

At the end, ask the kids to draw the creature we are studying. If possible, show them pictures (for example, from the internet) of these creatures, and we compare. They are all stored in a book and can be shown to parents, etc.

The kids will then think Torah is pretty cool and has interesting things to say.

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Much of this material was drawn from the book by Natan Slifkin: *Sacred Monsters: Mysterious and Mythical Creatures of Scripture, Talmud and Midrash* (Zoo Torah/Yashar Books 2006) [ISBN 1-933143-18-5](https://www.amazon.com/Sacred-Monsters-Mysterious-Mythical-Creatures/dp/0978007100)