

# Educators' Guide

Includes Discussion Questions, Classroom Activities, and an Exclusive Author Letter



## *The Witch of* Woodland

*Author of MY JASPER JUNE*  
**LAUREL SNYDER**





**Educators Guide for**  
*The Witch of Woodland*

## About the Book

Laurel Snyder, author of *Orphan Island*, returns with a story of one girl's quest to answer the seemingly unanswerable questions about what makes us who we are.

Hi, whoever is reading this. I'm Zipporah Chava McConnell, but everyone calls me Zippy.

Things used to be simple—until a few weeks ago. Now my best friend, Bea, is acting funny; everyone at school thinks I'm weird; and my mom is making me start preparing for my bat mitzvah, even though we barely ever go to synagogue. In fact, the only thing that still seems to make sense is magic.

See, the thing is, I'm a witch. I've been casting spells since I was little. And even if no one else wants to believe in magic anymore, it's always made sense to me, always felt true. But I was still shocked the day I found a strange red book at the library and somehow...I conjured something. A girl, actually. A beautiful girl with no memory,



and wings like an angel. You probably don't believe me, but I swear it's the truth.

Miriam is like no one else I've ever met. She's proof that magic is real. And, it's hard to explain this part, but I just know that we're connected. That means it's up to me to help Miriam figure out what she is and where she came from. If I can do that, maybe everything else in my life will start to make sense too.

Anyway, it's worth a try.

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## About the Author:

Laurel Snyder is the beloved author of many picture books and novels for children, including the National Book Award nominee *Orphan Island* and the Theodor Seuss Geisel Award winner *Charlie & Mouse*. A graduate of

the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she teaches in Hamline University's MFA in writing for children and young adults program. Laurel lives in Atlanta with her family and can be found online at [www.laurelsnyder.com](http://www.laurelsnyder.com).



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## A Letter from Laurel Snyder about *The Witch of Woodland*

*Dear Reader,*

When I was growing up, there weren't books about kids like me. There were a few books about Jewish kids, and I loved them, but even so, I couldn't find myself in those stories.

My own Jewish family wasn't like the ones in the books. My parents were intermarried and divorced. We didn't go to synagogue much and only celebrated major holidays. As a result, the Jewish books I managed to get my hands on often made me feel like something of an outsider. "If that's what it means to be Jewish, I guess I'm not," was the refrain in my head.

What did make me feel represented was magic. I believed deeply in magic, and the library was full of incredible stories about kids who met fairies or walked through wardrobes to find themselves transported to other worlds. Like the kids in those books, I believed in magic, and through those books, I felt connected to other kids all over the world who longed for portals and magical friends. In magic, I wasn't alone.

*The Witch of Woodland* is a combination of those two Laurels, those two versions of my own childhood. Like me, Zippy feels like an outsider. Like me, she's curious and interested in what it means to be Jewish. She isn't sure that she believes in God, exactly, but she knows deep in herself that she believes in magic, and she's wrestling with how to resolve the two.

It's worth noting that though this is my eighth middle grade novel, it's the first one in which I've engaged so fully with questions of Jewish identity. The ongoing rise in antisemitic violence made me realize how necessary it is for me to include this aspect of my life in my writing. I'm proud of my Jewish identity.

And there are an infinite number of ways to be Jewish. Like Zippy, I make a lot of mistakes, and learn from them. Like Zippy, I'm endlessly questioning and wrestling with the world around me. Like Zippy, I'm still finding my community (of which you are a welcomed part). And for me, that's a big part of what it means to be Jewish.



**Laurel Snyder**

# Discussion Questions

## Educators Guide for *The Witch of Woodland*



**1.** As Zippy begins her story, she says she told her best friend Bea that the story will be nonfiction. “‘The truth. Or as close as I can get, anyway.’ Bea scoffs. ‘The truth?...Nobody will believe you, Zippy. I barely believe you and I was there.’” [PAGE 2] Here, author Laurel Snyder uses a writing technique called foreshadowing to plant an idea, or an expectation, of what might happen. Like the author, Zippy uses a lots of writing techniques throughout the story, which she says she has learned from her Language and Literature teacher Ms. Marty. What other writing techniques and terms does Zippy use?

**2.** About her relationship with her once-best friend Bea, Zippy writes: “We both changed, I guess. But even if things are different and we fight, Bea is still my best friend....Bea is family to me. She just is. So if you’re reading this and thinking that she sounds mean or rude, I hope you’ll remember that no matter what, she’s my person.” [PAGE 3] What do we learn about Zippy herself, based on her descriptions of Bea at the beginning of this book? How do you think Bea would describe Zippy if she were writing her own book?

**3.** Zippy tells Rabbi Dan that she “‘hates group work. I’m better when I can work on my own.’” How does Zippy’s desire to work on her own conflict with her longing for connection? How does it conflict with what she is learning about her Jewish heritage? How does Rabbi Dan help Zippy begin to resolve this feeling? [PAGES 95-96]

**4.** When Zippy says to Rabbi Dan that the word she is focused on, “mehkashepha,” is “‘just one little word,’” he turns her observation into an opportunity for teaching and learning: “‘...it’s an important word, to you. You care about it. It has meaning. So you took the time to find it, to connect with the text. You have given it real thought and asked questions about it. Not only that, you’re arguing with it too. That is Jewish learning, Zippy. That is meaning and understanding.’” [PAGE 102] Think about Rabbi Dan’s reactions to Zippy’s feelings about the word “mehkashepha.” What do you think he means when he says “that is Jewish learning”? Why does Zippy feel so strongly about this one word? Are there any words to which you feel a personal connection?

**5.** Laurel Snyder writes about Zippy’s town using lots of very specific details. She mentions the stifling Atlanta heat, the kudzu, several real locations in the area. Part of why she is able to paint such a vivid picture of this setting is because she really lives in this part of Atlanta. If you were writing a book that took place in your hometown, what details would you include? Make a list of these details. Incorporate all five senses to help readers feel like they are there.





## Discussion Questions *continued*

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**6.** Zippy tells us that to her, the rituals are the most important part of her Jewish heritage: “...even if I didn’t know what anyone was saying or believe in any of it, I loved to look around at everyone in their beautiful white prayer shawls. I loved the music. And the prayers sounded a lot like spells to me.” [PAGE 105] What rituals in your life are important to you? Maybe they are centered around religious beliefs, or holidays, or birthdays. How do these rituals make you feel connected to your family or community?

**7.** In Chapter 14, Zippy’s parents notice that she is humming a song. She doesn’t know what song it is, but later, all alone in the dark, she tries to play it on the piano. She writes: “I wasn’t sure why I was doing it, except that the song was stuck in my head.... But I kept going, softly, carefully, in that beam of moonlight. Note after note. As I did, I somehow felt less confused, less alone, like

the dream was falling away with the music. Like the song was keeping me company.” [PAGE 138]

It turns out this song is one that Zippy’s grandfather used to sing to her mother when she was little.

Do you have a song that brings you comfort, like this one does for Zippy? Do you have any songs that are meaningful to your family?

**8.** On page 106, Zippy writes: “It’s much easier to be lonely alone than to be lonely and with people, and that’s a fact.” Discuss what she means by this.

**9.** Every time Zippy and Miriam touch, it seems like they exchange memories. Zippy gains some (like becoming fluent in Hebrew and liking the taste of salmon) and loses others (like her memories of the family trip to Alaska). One night, Miriam and Zippy fly together to the famous Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, which Zippy tells Miriam is full of famous people. [PAGES 180-187] Look up the Oakland Cemetery and learn about some of the famous graves there. If you had to gain some memories from one of the people in there, who would it be? What would you like to learn about their lives?



# What's the big deal about a bat mitzvah, anyway?

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“A bat mitzvah is a life cycle event, Zippy, a way of marking change. It's also the moment you become a full member of this community. It's a kind of transformation.

“Transformation?”

“You're not a little kid anymore,” said Rabbi Dan. “You're growing up, becoming a Jewish woman. It's exciting, and we just want to celebrate that with you.” [PAGE 30]

As Zippy describes in *The Witch of Woodland*, Judaism has a lot of rules. Many rules concern everyday life, such as what Jews should and shouldn't eat, or when to go to synagogue. Some of these rules may seem odd today, such as what to do when a donkey gets loose and causes problems with the neighbors or falls into a hole! Most of the rules don't apply to everyone equally. When growing up in the Jewish faith, there are plenty of chances to skirt around the rules or even ignore them entirely when you are a kid. But when a person becomes a bat mitzvah\*, that all changes.

As Zippy prepares to become a bat mitzvah, she is now old enough that the rules apply to her. She will suddenly be responsible for the decisions she makes and the things she does and says. She is old enough to deal with most of the consequences of her choices. Like Zippy, most people spend a few months or even a year or longer preparing to lead the prayer service for their bat mitzvah ceremony.

A bat mitzvah like Zippy is usually expected to lead some (or even all) of the

prayers, read some (or even all) of that week's Torah portion and other readings. Ideally, the bat mitzvah will give a sort-of sermon, a d'var torah, that teaches about the lessons she's learned from her Torah reading, the process of studying, and anything else she might find important.

The bat mitzvah service itself is usually a very typical Jewish synagogue service that is conducted on a Saturday morning. Even though the person becoming a bat mitzvah might lead the prayers, this is purely symbolic. We often celebrate this ceremony as the first time a person gets to say the blessings over the Torah, but really, when a person wakes up on the morning of their 12th or 13th birthday (depending on the family's tradition), they're automatically a bat mitzvah. The ceremony itself is just an important way to recognize the changes and new rules the person has to follow now that they're older. Plus, it's a really great opportunity to throw a big party, and who doesn't love a great party?

*\*Bat mitzvah literally means “daughter of the commandments.” Bar mitzvah is “son of the commandments.” A newer, gender-neutral term is “brit (breet) mitzvah,” which means “a covenant/promise for the commandments,” and lots of people use an English-adapted term, “b'mitzvah” which takes out any references to gender entirely. We are using the words bat mitzvah here because it describes Zippy's experience, but any of the other words equally refer to the same event.*



# The Jewish High Holidays: Creating and Recreating the World

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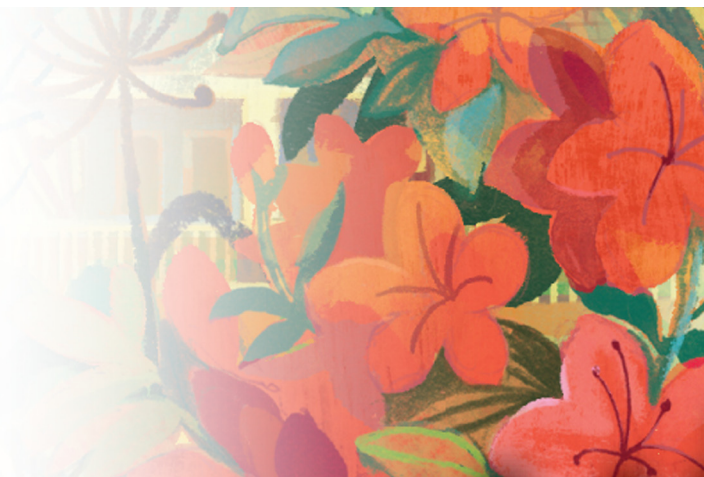
Zippy's story mostly takes place over the Jewish high holidays, a period that begins with Rosh Hashanah, the new year, and ends with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, ten days later. Spiritually, Rosh Hashanah commemorates the creation of the world. Though most Jews don't believe that the world was literally created in six days, Rosh Hashanah uses that story as an allegory for everyone starting fresh, with clean slates and the opportunity to participate in the act of world creation. Like Rabbi Dan says, parts of the creation of the world were left unfinished, and it is humanity's responsibility to find those pieces that haven't been completed and help repair what's missing. [PAGES 108-109]

Rosh Hashanah is a holiday filled with symbols. Jews eat apples, which come into season just in time for the holiday, with honey, to celebrate the sweetness of a new year. Rosh Hashanah doesn't just focus on new beginnings, though. It also serves as a kind of closure for all the choices we made in the previous year. Even though a new year has started, Jews spend the first ten days of it focusing on the previous year, taking stock of everything, and deciding on ways to make better choices in the future. Jews demonstrate this serious introspection

and self-reflection with the ritual of tashlich. Jews take bread or cracker crumbs from their pockets or bags and toss them away, as if they were tossing away last year's bad choices. In *The Witch of Woodland*, Zippy performs tashlich by scattering crumbs in the creek at Red's Farm. [PAGES 112-117]

The ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are referred to as "Aseret Y'may Teshuvah," or, "The Ten Days of Repentance (or Return)." It's during those ten days that Jews are supposed to be thoughtful and contemplate what happened during the previous year and what can change for the new year. It can be really hard work. The process culminates with Yom Kippur, when Jews acknowledge the bad choices made and create a plan to avoid making those same choices a second time. Jews don't eat or drink on Yom Kippur (hence Bea's nickname for it, "Hungry Apology Day"), not to punish themselves, but to keep their thoughts focused entirely on the challenge of repentance and change. It's not an easy thing to do at all.

Many of the questions Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur inspire can be hard to answer and may even be scary. As Rabbi Dan tells Zippy, sometimes asking those questions, wrestling with possible answers, and exploring possibilities really is the most important part. Not every question can be answered, and not every mistake can be fixed, but the act of trying and searching for the right answer often provides answers people didn't even know they were seeking. [PAGES 29-34]





# For Further Discussion

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### The Importance of Ritual

🍎 Zippy loves how Jewish rituals, like lighting candles and blessing grape juice and challah (bread) for Shabbat and holidays, feel like a little bit of transformative, everyday magic. The thought and care that are part of ritual can turn an ordinary moment into something special. What moments in your life do you think could use some kind of ritual or even a little bit of magic to mark what's happening? What could that ritual be?

### The importance of Place

🌻 Zippy talks about how she feels different in different places. At home she feels safe and protected. In the woods she feels magical. In synagogue she feels challenged. How do the spaces you're in change the way you feel? Do you like the way you feel in your different spaces? Have you ever worked hard to change your spaces so you would feel different? Describe the steps you took to change one of our spaces for the better.

### Are You What You Wear?

🍎 Zippy and her mom have a really hard conversation about Zippy's friends, the way she dresses, and the way she acts. Zippy's mom encourages Zippy to try and fit in a bit more, maybe dress differently and act differently. Zippy responds that she doesn't want to be a fake version of herself, and shuts down the conversation. Why do you think Zippy's mom tries to give the advice that she does? Do you agree with Zippy's response? If you could rewrite that conversation, what would you change and what would you keep the same?

### Please Listen!

🌻 Sometimes Zippy feels like her parents really didn't understand what she is thinking about, what she wants, or what she is going through. To make things worse, when Zippy does speak up, sometimes her parents dismiss her feelings with a joke and a sort-of insult, like calling her "frum" (extra religious). What do you think is missing between Zippy and her parents in those moments that makes it hard for everyone to understand what the others are thinking? If you were Zippy's parents, how would you approach those conversations differently? What about if you were Zippy?

### Belonging

🍎 Being part of both a religious community and a secular (non-religious) community is really important to Zippy's family. Sometimes that makes Zippy feel really proud, and sometimes she's a little bit embarrassed and apologizes for not being as "good" at being religious as she thinks she's supposed to be. Think about your family and the communities you're a part of. When do you feel like you have a good balance between all of your different communities, and when do you have to work hard to make them mix well? What kinds of challenges have you faced that remind you of Zippy's family? What kind of challenges have you dealt with that are totally different?





## For Further Discussion *continued*

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### Changes

🌻 At the very beginning of the book, Zippy talks about how she knows something has changed between her and Bea, but she can't quite figure out what it is. She just knows that something did change. Have there been moments in your own life that you can point to as a time when someone or something clearly changed? Were you able to figure out what caused the change, or did things just kind of happen the way they did for Zippy? Was it scary, exciting, or maybe even both?

### Food Traditions

🍎 While most Jewish families might make something like brisket for Rosh Hashanah dinner, Zippy's family makes or takes out their favorite foods to eat together, with fancy plates and napkins. Zippy's family does make a traditional apple cake, but the rest of their traditions are their own. How does your family celebrate holidays? Do you do everything traditionally or do you and your family have your own rituals that make the day special for you?

### Taking Flight

🌻 When Zippy and Miriam sneak out of the house and fly to the cemetery, both girls have intense and powerful moments that bring up many different emotions and feelings. Miriam both dismisses

death and is incredibly sad when she sees the lion statue, while Zippy experiences a mix of fear and awe as she flies through the night with Miriam. When they both leave the cemetery and return to Zippy's home though, the overwhelming feeling both of them have is one of sadness. Why do you think they each feel sad after such an eventful night? Do you think their emotions match the extraordinary nature of what they experienced at the cemetery and on the trip back home?

### Transforming

🍎 If you were to talk to Zippy about the way she looks at the beginning of the book, she'd probably tell you that she doesn't pay much attention to her hair or her clothes (she dresses in all black because she dresses in all black) and that what she looks like doesn't define her. But after she accidentally burns some of her hair off with her candle and then gets her new haircut, suddenly everything changes. Why do you think a new haircut and new clothes are so powerfully transformative for her? How much do you let the way you style your hair or the clothes

you choose define your personality? Do you want your clothes and style to speak for you? Do you like when they do speak for you, or do you try to minimize those parts of you so people notice them less?



# Extension Activities: Written Questions and Projects

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🌻 Parents and teachers often make assumptions about the kind of person we're supposed to be and the kind of person we're going to become. Make a compare and contrast list of Zippy's bat mitzvah experience. What do her parents expect it should be? What does Rabbi Dan expect? What does Zippy herself expect it to be? How far apart are these expectations? How similar? Write a "missing scene," where everyone sits down together to work out these differences and tackle this hard conversation.

🍎 Imagine that you encounter Miriam/Paula, and that instead of returning to wherever it was that she came from, she officially stays in your community and she's going to be in your class. Your teacher has put you in charge of making sure everyone is ready to welcome her to school and the neighborhood. What instructions and information do you share with your classmates? What tasks do you assign? How do you make sure your parents, neighbors, and friends are ready to welcome Miriam/Paula?

🌻 Almost every culture, religion, or tradition has some kind of "coming of age" ritual like Zippy's bat mitzvah. It could be an individual's celebration, as in Zippy's case, which requires months of study and preparation. Or it could be a group celebration to mark a special moment, such as the completion of a grade. Together with your class, create a ritual or moment to share at the end of your school year. Discuss ways to mark this occasion. What are some elements you can include that will make for a meaningful and memorable group experience?

🍎 Some of the people who have the most impact on our lives only show up for a brief period of time, like Miriam/Paula. She doesn't stick around long, but the parts she's around for have an incredible impact on Zippy. Based on what you've read, what you've thought, and what you've discussed, do you think Miriam/Paula was a real person, or do you think Zippy somehow created her and brought her into existence from her imagination? Using evidence from the text, write out your argument for why Miriam/Paula is entirely real, Zippy's own creation, or something in between. How do each of the possibilities change the story and how do they affect the ending?





# Resources to Learn More About Judaism

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## My Jewish Learning

[myjewishlearning.com](http://myjewishlearning.com) - My Jewish Learning is a non-profit organization whose goal is to empower Jewish learning and discovery. Its website is filled with resources, videos, articles, and links to information about every aspect of Judaism and nearly every branch of Judaism. It is a great resource for people of any background who are curious to learn more.

## 18 Doors

[18doors.org](http://18doors.org) - A Jewish organization dedicated to people in interfaith relationships and families. In addition to programming and resources for families, their website has lots of great explainers on Judaism and Jewish rituals and customs written in a way that's easy for everyone to understand.

## Reform Judaism

[reformjudaism.org](http://reformjudaism.org) - Reform Judaism is a movement of Judaism that balances a commitment to ancient, Jewish principles and to the diversity of modern Jewish life. Their website has a great overview of most of the key takeaways of Jewish holidays and traditions.

## Reconstructing Judaism

[reconstructingjudaism.org](http://reconstructingjudaism.org) - The synagogue that serves as the inspiration for Zippy's Congregation Bet Hesed is a part of Reconstructing Judaism, or, Reconstructionism. Reconstructionists approach Judaism as an ever-evolving process. They connect ancient traditions and resources to modern situations and opportunities. The Reconstructing Judaism website has great background and articles for teachers looking to understand Rabbi Dan's approach to Zippy's questions and why the right questions can be so powerful.

## Bim Bam

[bimbam.com](http://bimbam.com) - Bim Bam has an incredible collection of animated videos for kids and adults of all ages on all kinds of topics, from Jewish ritual and practice to the weekly Torah portion. They have a great video on Zippy's Torah portion, Mishpatim, and they have lots of information on the bat mitzvah process and the Jewish holidays like "Hungry Apology Day" (or, Yom Kippur).

## Jewish Unpacked

[jewishunpacked.com](http://jewishunpacked.com) - Geared toward older kids and adults, Jewish Unpacked has articles, podcasts, and videos on current events and history that impact or relate back to Jews and Judaism. Many of their videos are made as part of a curriculum series designed with Jewish day schools.



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