



PETER KRAUSZ

STUDYGUIDE



Welcome to the Waks Family

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Waks Family is a documentary about a most unusual family; one that has 17 children from the same two parents. The Waks are an orthodox Jewish family practising the Lubavitcher perspective, which involves strict adherence to Jewish laws and customs. This film, shot over five years by the film-makers, follows the celebrations and day to day events of the family as they experience the joys and difficulties of living in such a large, devout family. The film explores their background, faith development, challenges to their faith and their strong bonds. Given a rare opportunity to observe the family, the film provides a revealing insight into an orthodox doctrine of one of the world's major, and little understood, religions.



CURRICULUM LINKS

Welcome to the Waks Family is relevant to upper Primary and Secondary school students at all levels, covering areas that include cultural studies, studies of society and the environment, personal development, religious studies, English, media studies, social issues and history. The activities listed can be applied, as appropriate, to students from a wide range of levels and ages, and relate to an integrated curriculum approach as well as a subject specific approach.



BEFORE WATCHING

From time to time, documentary film-makers use the 'fly on the wall' approach to film-making, where they spend a long period of time with a family or other group of people, in order to record the way they operate, interact and change over the time of filming.

Welcome to the Waks Family was filmed over five years. Before seeing the film, discuss some of the issues that you would expect to occur if you and your family were filmed by a film-maker over five years. Topics would include:

- Impact on the family
- Whether your behaviour would change because of the camera
- Effect on your friends
- Privacy
- The influence of the film-maker
- Personal issues and the public arena
- What changes you would expect to occur over time
- How your life could be affected at the end of five years

AFTER VIEWING

* Note that these activities can apply to Primary and/or Secondary level, and can be completed as oral or written tasks within a whole class, in small groups or individually.

TOPIC 1: RELIGION

- What are the key celebrations as performed by the Jewish household?
- What is the difference between an orthodox Jewish family and a Reform (Liberal) Jewish family? Find out how and why two distinct types of Jewish belief have developed over the years.
- What is the Lubavitcher view of the world? What is your opinion on the way they teach their children?
- Are any class members of Jewish heritage, or do you know any Jewish people? It would be worthwhile getting to know someone Jewish and comparing their family with the one in the film.
- What does it mean to have a kosher kitchen? What is the Torah? What does it mean to put on Tefillin? What is the significance of the Bar-Mitzvah for a Jewish boy and the Bat-Mitzvah for a Jewish girl? What is the Sabbath? When does it occur for Jews and why is it so important in orthodox Judaism? On the Sabbath, there are many restrictions during the 24 hours: list them and discuss the impact they could have on your own life. Why do orthodox Jews tend to live very close to one another? Research these major parts of the Jewish belief system and prepare a presentation for your classmates on one perspective of Judaism.
- How does Judaism compare with other major religions? What similarities and differences are there?



CAPTIONS: (Photographer is Alex Freiberg unless otherwise marked). PREVIOUS PAGE FROM TOP: All 19 members of the Waks family at the wedding of the eldest son, Menahem; Shmayo Waks studying at the Lubavitch Yeshivah, New York (photos: Rod Freedman) THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE TOP LEFT: Four of the Waks boys (l-r) Levi, Chaim, Sruli and Dov Ber; Shmayo at the Lubavitch Yeshivah (photo: Rod Freedman); Haya Waks lights Sabbath candles with daughter, Dvoro Leoh; Haya Waks making wigs; Eldest son, Menahem Waks, in the Israeli Army (photo courtesy of Menahem Waks)



- How do you feel about the various Laws that the Waks family observes? Provide examples and discuss the advantages and disadvantages of having such laws as an important part of your everyday life.
- The term Zionist is used frequently when discussing Jewish belief. What does it mean? Where did the term come from and why has it caused so much debate over the years?
- Orthodox Judaism clearly divides the roles of men and women. In what ways is this demonstrated in the film? What are your views about this division?
- A fact stated in the program is that Melbourne has the largest population of orthodox Jews in Australia. Find out why this has occurred.

TOPIC 2: FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

- There are 17 children in the Waks family. Discuss in class some of the benefits and drawbacks of being part of a family with so many children. How does the Waks family cope with this situation? Write a story or essay based on the idea of being a member of a huge family such as this. If you were a member of the Waks family, what would be some of the issues and day to day events that would impact on you? Write a short play that has a number of characters from the one family and act out some of the issues and situations that would arise. Role play some of the examples of possible conflict in the family and how they could be resolved.
- Debate in class the following topic or something similar: That it is better for a child's development to be part of a large family compared with a small family or being an only child.
- Draw some pictures of the Waks family visiting a particular place.
- What were the reasons for the eldest son's break from the family, and why did he return to them recently? Discuss the different points of view on the split and return, according to the son and the parents.
- What is your opinion of the division of labour in the Waks household?

Discuss the different roles of the mother, father and children. Who does what? How is that similar to and different from your own parents and family?

- Discuss the upbringing of each of the parents. How have the ways they were brought up shaped their attitudes and beliefs? How has the way your parents/guardians brought you up affected your attitudes and beliefs?
- What do you think about the idea of an arranged marriage for the eldest daughter? Some other cultures also do this; find out which ones. What are the advantages and disadvantages of such an arrangement?
- The Waks family has a number of restrictions, including the use of television. What sort of television programs are they allowed to watch? Why has this decision been made? List the other restrictions that involve all or some members of the family. What is your opinion of these restrictions? Discuss or debate the positive and negative aspects of living in a family with such restrictions.
- One aspect of the Lubavitcher Jewish faith is the possibility of some of the sons living and studying in New York. Imagine you are one of these children given this opportunity; what would you be studying in America and how might your life be different from your family life in Australia?

TOPIC 3: GENERAL

- Do you think the film presents the Waks family in a positive or negative way? What makes you say that? List in detail the positive and negative aspects of the program as it reflects on the family. How could the film-maker change the film in such a way as to make the family appear more positive or more negative? What are some of the methods film-makers use in documentaries to present an attitude (in a subtle way) or judgment about their subjects? Can you think of any documentaries you've seen recently that could help you in discussing this issue?

- Write a script and film (or create a storyboard for) your own video about a family. What are some of the key issues or ideas you would want to present? Early in *Welcome to the Waks Family* we are introduced to one of the children who acts as a host to the film-makers. Why was the child involved in this way? How will your film present the family you've selected? As well as including many interviews, the program also uses voice-over narration from director/producer/writer Barbara Chobocky and some additional footage shot in America. What is the role of such devices? What devices would you include in your documentary about a family?
- Discuss the meaning of 'stereotype'. Judaism or Jewish culture can be presented in a very stereotyped way. What are the stereotypes that have been commonly presented in the media about Jewish people? In what ways can this stereotyping be challenged? What other cultures are presented in this sort of way? To what extent does this film both challenge and confirm some people's stereotypical views of Jewish culture and life?

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

- There is an excellent, comprehensive web site that will allow you to find out about Judaism: www.jewishaustralia.com
- There are a number of films and other documentaries that have Jewish themes and cover aspects of the issues raised in *Welcome to the Waks Family*. These can help to provide further insights into the way the media presents Judaism:
 - *Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz* (Kotcheff, 1974) concerns a Jewish boy's experiences in trying to achieve a good career.
 - *The Chosen* (Kagan, 1981) looks at the friendship between two boys in 1940s America, one of whom is an orthodox Jew.
 - *Fiddler on the Roof* (Jewison, 1971) portrays a village of Russian Jews, their traditional ways and the threat to their existence due to anti-semitism.



TOP-BOTTOM: Haya Waks and 5 of the 17 children with one of the family buses; Haya and Zephaniah Waks (photo: Nicholas Sherman)

- *Hester Street* (Micklin Silver, 1975), set in turn of the 20th century America, is about a Jewish couple who question their traditional upbringing.
- *The Jazz Singer* (Crosland, 1927; Curtiz, 1952; Fleischer, 1980) concerns the son of a rabbi who finds a different direction in his life to the disapproval of his family.
- *Mamadrama* (Schwarz, 2000) looks at the Jewish mother in cinema.
- *Norman Loves Rose* (Safran, 1982). An Australian-made romantic farce about the mismatched pairing of a Jewish teenager and his sister-in-law.
- *The Pianist* (Polanski, 2002) looks at one Jewish man's survival during the frightening days of the Holocaust in WW2.
- *A Price Above Rubies* (Yakin, 1998) is about a Jewish woman who fights against the orthodox view about the role of women in a Jewish marriage.
- *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993) looks at the Holocaust in WW2 and an industrialist's attempt to save a number of Jews.
- *Uncle Chatzkel* (Freedman, 1999). From Tsarist Russia to independent Lithuania, Uncle Chatzkel has seen it all—except for his Australian relatives. A Film Australia National Interest Program.
- *What is a Jew to You?* (Ziegler, 1986). Australian film-maker Aviva Ziegler turns the camera on herself to explore the essence of her own Jewishness. A Film Australia National Interest Program.
- Organize a visit to a synagogue to talk to a rabbi about Jewish customs and festivals, as presented in the film. It may be useful to visit both an Orthodox and Liberal (Reform) synagogue to get different perspectives on Jewish religious practices. Alternatively, you may wish to invite a rabbi to the school to discuss these issues.

For information about Film Australia's programs, contact:
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WELCOME TO THE WAKS FAMILY. A FILM AUSTRALIA NATIONAL INTEREST PROGRAM IN ASSOCIATION WITH DOCUMENTARY FILMS PTY LTD. PRODUCED IN ASSOCIATION WITH SBS INDEPENDENT.

DIRECTOR/PRODUCER: Barbara Chobocky. CO-PRODUCER: Rod Freedman. WRITERS: Barbara Chobocky, Jeff Bruer. EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: Franco di Chiera. YEAR OF PRODUCTION: 2001