

Writing Memorable Characters: Elu v'Elu - These and Those

Introduction for facilitators

Memorable characters are relatable, heroic, emotive, and engaging. More adjectives could apply. Yet at their core, across genres—from stories, plays, and film to narrative poetry, memoir, and songs—memorable characters share one common trait: complexity. Just as we explore how writing deeply felt emotions requires us, as Jewish writers, to convey emotions like joy (*simcha*) in a complex way, the same intention holds true when writing indelible characters.

Guiding our writing of memorable characters will be the Talmudic lens known as *Elu v'Elu* (“these and those”). Most often, the idea of *Elu v'Elu*—valuing “these and those”—pertains to an approach to arguments that honors all voices. Jewish tradition teaches that we are to hear one another, even contrasting voices, because there is insight in each perspective. We believe that a third way—a better way—can emerge from conflict when we listen to contrasting points of view offered in search of a good outcome.

As Jewish writers, we are invited to apply a “these and those” approach to creating characters. When we do, we avoid writing what are known as “flat characters”—those with a single defining trait, such as fully good or fully evil, and unable to grow and change. Rather, we seek to create characters who embody contrasting worthy desires: to do good, to be moral, and to reach for power, pleasure, and self-preservation.

We’ll explore the inevitable outcome of characters with contrasting motivations and traits: conflict. We’ll give voice to our characters’ internal conflicts (e.g., moral or psychological) and to the external expression of the insight that emerges from that internal struggle—a third, generative way. Their efforts to resolve conflict become the engine that releases insight, enabling characters to grow and change while providing forward momentum and drama.

Elu v'Elu provides us with a uniquely Jewish blueprint for creating memorable, complex characters, framing their personal alchemy of decision-making in a way that reflects how we understand human nature and how we craft engaging literature. In the following three sessions (90 minutes each), you will use the tools of:

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1. Backstory, which explains why a character is motivated by contrasting worthy desires—to do good and to act morally (these) and for power, pleasure and personal gain (those).
2. Internal monologue, which reveals dueling motivations within your characters as well as their search for insight, the source of growth and change.
3. Dialogue, which brings to the fore a character's emerging growth and change, putting them in relation with another.

The three sessions are designed to stand alone. Each session explores a different aspect of *Elu v'Elu* and a different writing practice for creating memorable characters. Participants who are able to attend all three sessions can experience the added benefit of building and deepening the same character over time.

Adjust your schedule as needed. Some JWCs may wish to spend more than one session on each source sheet. The chart below highlights the big ideas in each session: a core concept, a writing tool, and a Jewish wisdom text.

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Writing Memorable Characters	Writing Tool	Jewish Wisdom
Session One: Contrasting Traits and Desires	The backstory: The rationale for a character's unique needs, desires, or traits; a tool enabling the writer to fully know their character.	<i>Bereshit Rabbah:</i> All desires are valued: <i>yetzer hara</i> (desire to do evil) and <i>yetzer hatov</i> (desire to do good)
Session Two: Conflict	Internal monologue: Reveals the character's unique voice as they struggle to resolve their conflicting desires and traits.	Avivah Gottlieb Zorenberg's commentary on the value of solitude to resolve conflict and the need for integration, not sublimation of desires
Session Three: The Third Way	Dialogue: Demonstrates, in relationship to another, a character's growth and change, revealing the impact of feedback (negative or positive).	New Day Will Rise, an Israeli song, illustrating an expression of a third way that grows stronger with the help of encouraging voices