PING-PONG SHABBAT

THE TRUE STORY OF CHAMPION ESTEE ACKERMAN

Discussion Guide

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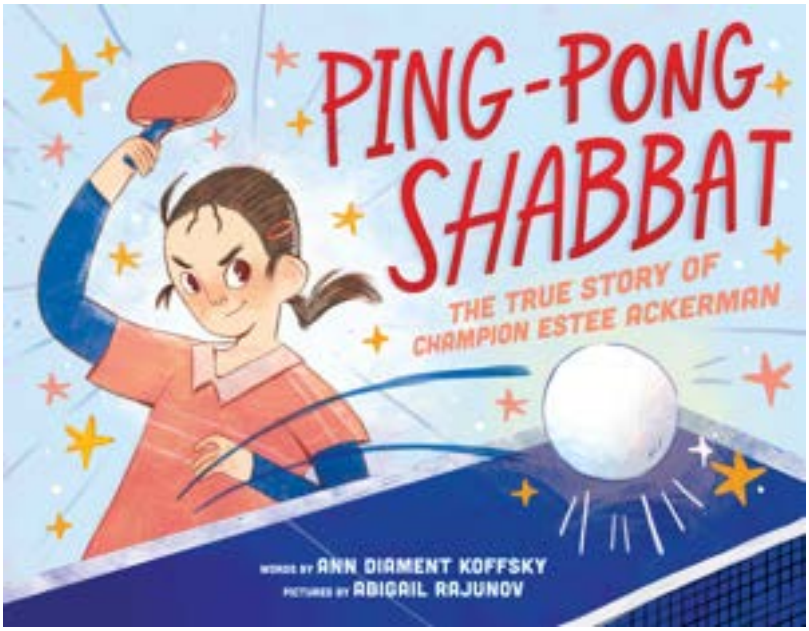

When eleven-year old Ping-Pong phenom Estee Ackerman had her championship match scheduled on the Sabbath, she faced a difficult choice: compete for a gold medal, or honor her faith.

Tournament after tournament, Estee kept winning.
She beat all sorts of players. Some were older than Estee. Some were younger.
She even beat tennis star Rafael Nadal!
She became one of the best Ping-Pong players in the United States.

Estee Ackerman loved Ping-Pong more than anything. But she also loved and honored the Jewish tradition of the Sabbath. At eleven, she began to rise in the ranks of tournament players, making it all the way to the finals of the US National Table Tennis Championships. She only had one player left to beat to win a gold medal-but the final match was set during Shabbat, and the judges said they couldn't change it. How could Estee choose between her passion and her faith? This is the true story of a girl's struggle between her love for her religion and her love of the game.

Thematic Connections

Sports/ Ping Pong
Competition
Family
Identity
Religion/ Judaism/ faith
Making difficult decisions

Ann Diament Koffsky is the author and/or illustrator of more than fifty books for kids, including the Kayla and Kugel series, The Three Little Sheep, and Different Kinds of Minds with Temple Grandin. Shabbat is definitely her favorite day of the week. Occasionally, Ann enjoys picking up a paddle and playing pickleball . . . but she's nowhere near as good as Estee! Find out more at annkoffsky.com.

Abigail Rajunov is an illustrator based in Dallas, Texas. She loves to draw silly characters, whimsical scenes, and emotional moments. As someone who was raised Jewish, she is honored to help tell Estee's story for her debut picture book! When she isn't illustrating, Abigail loves to play video games, strum on her guitar, and plein air paint in her sketchbook. You can find more of her work at abigailrajunov.net

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Vocabulary

Look at the words below. What do you think they mean? If they are new to you, see if you can guess by looking at them inside the book. Now look up the words in a printed or online dictionary. Notice which of the words are in Hebrew. Were you able to figure out their correct meaning? How do they each connect to the story?

- Championship
- Devotion
- Mazel tov
- Shabbat
- Synagogue
- Tournament

Discussion Questions

- Have you ever played Ping Pong? If yes, do you enjoy it? If not, would you like to try?
- The book says that Estee feels strong when she plays Ping Pong. Why do you think playing Ping Pong makes her feel that way? What activities do you like to do that make you feel strong?
- When Estee has to choose between Shabbat and Ping Pong, she asks her parents what she should do. They tell her, “It’s up to you, Estee”. Why do you think her parents left the choice up to Estee?
- Turn to the last page of the book and read “In Estee’s Own words”. What do her words mean to you?
- Look closely at this illustration of Estee and her family. What objects do you see that are connected to celebrating Shabbat? What holidays do your family celebrate? What objects do they use as part of the celebration?

Extension Activity

Estee is not the first athlete who had to choose between sports and faith.

Two of the most famous are Major League Baseball players Sandy Koufax and Hank Greenberg
You can find out more about their stories online, or, read about them in these picture books:

- *You Never Heard of Sandy Koufax?!*
  - By Jonah Winter and illustrated by Andre Carrilho
- *Hank on First! How Hank Greenberg Became a Star On and Off the Field*
  - By Stephen Krensky and illustrated by Alette Straathof

Once you've learned more, discuss: how are their stories similar to Estee's? Different?

Further Learning

More Information about Estee and videos of her Ping-Pong playing can be found at the links below:

- Estee playing Bobby Flay on the Rachel Ray Show
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1AhugOHTI4
- CBS News Feature
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G80ZfhTMvzE
- Estee versus the New York Cosmos
  - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3UMey1ogZcU&t=216s
- New York Times- *The time an 11 Year Old Took Down Nadal*
  - https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/31/nyregion/a-long-island-teenager-looks-back-on-the-time-she-took-down-nadal.html