



Increasing Knowledge about Jews and Judaism

Teaching Aid

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1. Increasing Knowledge about Jews and Judaism

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Increasing Knowledge about Jews and Judaism

In 2016, the world's Jewish population was estimated to be nearly 14.5 million.¹ Although that may seem like a large number, since Jewish communities tend to be concentrated in certain areas, many students may have had few, if any, opportunities to get to know Jewish people or to learn about Jewish traditions and the religion of Judaism.

Due to this lack of contact and understanding, prejudices, presumptions and a mental collection of hearsay, rumours, myths and stereotypes can build over time. This type of ignorance can breed mistrust, and misunderstood differences can lead to fear and rejection. This can provide fertile ground for exclusion, intolerance and hatred.

Teachers need to be aware that this lack of knowledge and experience makes reliance on stereotypes more likely, and prejudices can be developed based on limited information about an unfamiliar group (a so-called “out-group”).

“Out-group” refers to those people who do not belong to a specific “in-group”. Research published in 2009 into the existence and relative strength of favouritism for in-groups versus out-groups based on multiple identity categories (body type, political views, nationality, religion and more) concluded that individuals' behaviour towards others was significantly affected by their respective identities. In particular, the research found that:

- those belonging to the in-group are treated more favourably than those belonging to the out-group in nearly all identity categories and in all contexts; and
- family and kinship are the most powerful sources of differentiation, followed by political views, religion, sports-team loyalty and music preferences.

SOURCE: Avner Ben-Ner et al., “Identity and in-group/out-group differentiation in work and giving behaviors: Experimental evidence”, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, Vol. 72, Issue 1, 2009, pp. 153-170.

Seeing Jewish people as an “out-group” fosters prejudice against them. Increased knowledge and familiarity with an unknown tradition is one of several teaching strategies that can be employed to decrease prejudice and the perceived differences between an “in-group” and an “out-group”.²

The purpose of this teaching aid is to provide basic knowledge about the religion, culture and diversity of the Jewish people; and foster understanding of the roots, practices and customs, prayers and beliefs, etc., of this diverse group. The teaching suggestions that follow can help students broaden their understanding of the many aspects of being Jewish.

¹ “2016 World Jewish Population”, The Berman Jewish DataBank, <<https://www.jewishdatabank.org/databank/search-results/study/831>>.

² Maureen McBride, Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice, “What works to reduce prejudice and discrimination? A review of the evidence”, 14 October 2015, <<https://www2.gov.scot/Resource/0048/00487370.pdf>>.

Background

The Jewish people first emerged as a distinct group in the Middle East in the second millennium BCE. Jews today are a heterogeneous group of people with different national origins, physical characteristics and various levels and types of religiosity.

The term “Jewish” refers today to any person belonging to the Jewish people or to Judaism by conversion. According to Jewish law – Halakha – Jewishness is transmitted by the mother, meaning that Jews are born Jewish. For many, however, the term does not explicitly refer to a religious affiliation but implies the recognition of a common cultural history.

The Jewish diaspora began following the destruction of the first temple in what is now modern day Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and continued during the Roman Empire.³ While some Jews remained in the region, living alongside other

religious or ethnic groups, many migrated. Today, different terms are used to refer to this geographic diversity.

- **“Ashkenazi”** refers to Jews who migrated into northern France and Germany around 800-1000 CE and later to Central and Eastern Europe, where many spoke Yiddish (a mixture of Hebrew and German).
- **“Sephardic”** describes Jews who went to Spain and Portugal, some settling in North Africa and the Ottoman Empire after being expelled during the Inquisitions in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Their language – Ladino – is a Spanish-Hebrew hybrid.
- **“Mizrahi”** is often used to refer to Jews outside of these two European groups. Their ancestors largely remained in the Middle East or lived in North Africa or Central Asia.⁴

- **Ethiopian** Jews are also known as the Beta Israel, many thousands of whom reside in Israel today.

- **Other Jewish ethnic groups** can be found around the world, from India to Canada.

Over the centuries, in some places Jews were invited by aristocratic rulers to settle in a defined territory, with limited rights. Before the emergence of national governments, national law and citizenship as we recognize them today, Jewish leaders maintained a relationship with the monarch, who agreed to protect them.⁵

In addition to the languages of national origin, Hebrew has become a unifying language for Jews in Israel and beyond. The re-birth of the ancient, biblical Hebrew as a living modern language in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

³ De Lange, Nicholas, *An Introduction to Judaism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 27.

⁴ For more on the term “Mizrahi” and how it is used around the world today see: <<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/who-are-mizrahi-jews/>>; <<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/mizrahim-in-israel/>>.

⁵ Examples of this relationship existed in France, England and Germany in the twelfth century. See: Gavin I. Langmuir, *Towards a Definition of Antisemitism* (London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 137-142.

is a remarkable cultural development.

Before the Holocaust, when six million Jews were killed in Europe, there were 16.7 million Jewish people worldwide. As of 2016, the global Jewish population had returned to 14.4 million – less than 0.2 per cent of the total world population. Today, the largest concentration of Jewish people live in Israel, which is inhabited by more than 6.5 million Jews – approximately 75 per cent of the country’s population.⁷

At the end of the nineteenth century, Jews were migrating to this part of what was then the Ottoman Empire. In the early twentieth century and after the Holocaust, the numbers migrating there increased considerably.

The fact that Jewish people represent a low percentage of the population of many countries (excluding Israel) means that people in those countries may have never met a Jewish person. At the same time, it is also possible that they have had contact with Jewish people without realizing it, since many Jewish people are not visibly Jewish. Some people associate Jews with the ultra-Orthodox, or *Hasidim*, whose traditional dress (black hats, beards and possibly

Jewish populations of selected OSCE participating States in 2016

Country ⁶	Jewish population	Total population (in millions)	Per cent (%) population who are Jewish
Azerbaijan	8,400	9.7	0.87
Belgium	29,500	11.2	0.26
Canada	388,000	35.8	1.08
France	460,000	64.3	0.71
Germany	117,000	81.1	0.14
Hungary	47,600	9.8	0.49
Italy	27,400	62.5	0.04
Latvia	5,000	2.0	2.5
Netherlands	29,900	16.9	0.18
Moldova	3,500	4.1	0.85
Russia	179,500	144.3	0.12
Sweden	15,000	9.8	0.15
Switzerland	18,800	8.3	0.23
Turkey	15,500	78.2	0.02
Ukraine	56,000	42.8	0.13
United Kingdom	290,000	65.3	0.44
United States	5,700,000	321.2	1.77

curled sidelocks) is highly visible.⁸ Some religious Jewish men can only be recognized as such because they wear a *kippah* (or *yarmulke*/skullcap). However, respondents to a 2018 survey

into European Jews’ experiences and perceptions of anti-Semitism indicated they sometimes avoided displaying their Judaism in public.⁹

⁶ Data from Sergio DellaPergola, “World Jewish Population, 2016”. Berman Jewish DataBank, No. 17 (February, 2017) p. 24.

⁷ Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, *Monthly Bulletin of Statistics* – February 2019, “Population, By Population Group”, <<https://www.cbs.gov.il/en/publications/Pages/2019/Monthly-Bulletin-of-Statistics-February-2019.aspx>>

⁸ Many Hasidic men wear suits that are reminiscent of the style Polish nobility wore in the 18th century, when Hasidic Judaism began.

⁹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Experiences and perceptions of antisemitism: second survey on discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the EU* (2018), p. 37, <<https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2018/2nd-survey-discrimination-hate-crime-against-jews>>.

Religious Aspects

According to biblical accounts, Jewish people are the descendants of Abraham. The key religious principle of Judaism is the belief in a single, omniscient, omnipotent, benevolent, transcendent God, who created the universe and continues to govern it. According to followers of Judaism, God¹⁰ revealed his laws and commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai in the form of the *Torah* (five books of Moses, which form the basis of Jewish law and tradition) – one of three parts that make up the Hebrew Bible, also known as the Old Testament.¹¹ Judaism as a religion pre-dates and has influenced and interacted with the development of other monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam. These three religions share foundational stories and key figures, such as Abraham and Moses.

In Judaism, the central authority does not rest in one person but in sacred texts and traditions. Traditional practice revolves around the study and observance of God's laws and commandments as written in the *Torah* and expounded in the *Talmud* (a collection of rabbinical writings). A Jewish religious leader is known as a *rabbi* – a scholar and teacher of the *Torah* who helps to interpret and apply Jewish law. The *rabbi*, just as the layman, is obligated to marry and experience all the struggles and pleasures of the mundane world.

As across all religious or cultural groups, there are many denominations within Judaism in the modern world. These groups may interpret Jewish law differently or hold different standards. The following

outlines the largest denominational groups, though others also exist.¹²

Orthodox Jews retain traditional Jewish laws and customs to varying extents, not only as they relate to liturgy but also regarding diet and dress. They stress the need for full respect for the authority of the *Halakha* – the entirety of written and oral laws of Judaism – in the belief that the revealed will of God, not the value system of a particular age, is the ultimate standard of conduct. The **Hasidim** comprise a significant segment of Orthodox Judaism — all Hasidim are Orthodox, but not all Orthodox are Hasidic.

The **Reform movement**, also known as **Progressive** or **Liberal Judaism**, arose in Germany in the early nineteenth

¹⁰ For many within the Jewish tradition, it is a sign of respect not to write the name of God because, by writing it, it can be erased or discarded. The term G-d is often used instead.

¹¹ Nicolas de Lange, *An Introduction to Judaism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 50. 162-163.

¹² See <<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-jewish-denominations/>> for more on streams of Judaism.

century as the legal and political limitations on European Jews were gradually dropped. The Reform movement stressed a personal interpretation of the Torah's teachings, while at the same time shortening the liturgy, introducing prayers and sermons in the local language rather than Hebrew and making dietary, clothing and Sabbath restrictions optional. Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), a German Jewish philosopher, was an influential figure in this movement.

Conservative Judaism, also known as **Masorti Judaism**, began in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century in response to the perceived loosening of Halakha within the Reform movement. Conservative Jews hailed the reforms of Judaism in the areas of education and culture (such as embracing modern dress) but returned to the use of Hebrew in the liturgy and the observance of dietary laws, the Sabbath and almost all Torah rituals. In the 1980s, Conservatives decided to admit women as rabbis.

There are also many Jewish people who do not identify with a particular denomination, or do not observe religious customs. Additionally, there are many communal organizations that are trans-denominational, serving the needs of Jewish community members regardless of the religious branch to which they adhere.

Key aspects of Jewish culture

The Sabbath: From sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, many religious Jews observe **Shabbat** at home or in the synagogue in a variety of ways and customs around the world; some refrain from work of any kind.

Dietary restrictions: There are dietary regulations in Jewish law that Jewish people observe to lesser or greater extents, while some do not observe them at all. Food that complies with Jewish law is called **kosher**. Pork and shellfish are forbidden, and other meats should normally be slaughtered according to strict rules, by a qualified person (*schochet*). Meat and dairy foods are not eaten, cooked or kept together; after consuming meat or poultry, an observant Jew waits some time before eating dairy foods. It is good practice to check directly with a person about their dietary restrictions.

Major holidays: As in every religious tradition, there are many Jewish holidays throughout the year. There are a few that are of high importance, even for people who are not particularly religious. The exact dates will vary slightly from year to year as Judaism follows a lunar calendar. It is useful to look up the dates and put them in the school calendar as they can have an impact on the lives of Jewish students, parents and colleagues.

- **Rosh Hashanah** is the Jewish New Year and lasts two days in early autumn. Together with Yom Kippur, it is considered the holiest of Jewish holidays.
- **Yom Kippur** is the Day of Atonement and falls ten days after Rosh Hashanah. By fasting and praying all day in synagogue, Jews take time to contemplate life, repent and make changes for the new year.
- **Passover** is a festival of freedom that takes place in spring to commemorate the historical Exodus of Jews from Egypt. It lasts for eight days and is celebrated on the first night with a ritual meal called a **seder**.
- **Chanukah** falls in mid-winter. Also known as the Festival of Lights, it is a gift-giving holiday that lasts eight days, over which time eight candles are lit on a special nine-branch candelabra called a Chanukah.

Rites of passage: All cultures and religions mark important life transitions. The following are a few that involve Jewish children:

- **Circumcision**: Jewish boys are generally circumcised when they are eight days old.
- **Bar mitzvah and bat mitzvah**: Around the ages of 12 or 13, boys mark their transition from childhood to adolescence with a **bar mitzvah** and girls with a **bat mitzvah**.

Source: Nicolas de Lange, *An Introduction to Judaism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.89-91, 95, 97-118, 226-237.

Classroom Strategies to Increase Knowledge about Jews and Judaism

Examples of exercises that educators can use to challenge and prevent anti-Semitic stereotypes¹³

Type of exercise	Example
Use personal narratives	<p>Share personal narratives that highlight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity within the Jewish world to demonstrate that Jews, like people of other traditions, have a wide range of religious beliefs and practices, or none at all; • Commonalities between Jews and others, such as cultural, socio-economic, geographical, linguistic and other characteristics; and • Jewish individuals and other people of diverse religious or cultural communities who have had positive impacts on local, national and/or international contexts.
Integrate into history lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach the history of the Jews at school as part of local, national or international history, including the history of the State of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian situation, using a multi-perspective approach;¹⁴ • Individualize the history and tell personal stories of Jewish individuals (ordinary people and well-known figures who have contributed to science, the arts, philosophy, etc.); • Consider how various stereotypes accepted in societies have and do impact on the rights enjoyed by men, women and members of certain communities or groups, including Jews, at different times in history as well as today; and/or • Include lessons about anti-Semitism from before the Holocaust through to the present (this does not replace essential lessons about the Holocaust).
Focus on students' diverse identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students can create their own self-portraits (in writing, painting, poems, etc.) to reflect their own diverse identities; • Have the students present their self-portraits and ask them to identify the diversity in their class (e.g., race, colour, language, nationality, national or ethnic origin, religion, culture, sex, sexual orientation, hobbies, interests, ideals and idiosyncrasies); • Guide students to identify certain aspects of their self-portraits that may reveal or generate a stereotype. To do this, ask students to focus on who they are and what factors influence the formation of their identity (including their own internal choices and external pressures); and/or • Explore the relationship between a student's self-perception of particular traits and others' perceptions of them to demonstrate how social narratives are constructed.

¹³ These examples have been taken from *Addressing Anti-Semitism Through Education: Guidelines for Policymakers* (Warsaw: OSCE/ODIHR, 2018), p. 41, <<https://www.osce.org/odihr/383089>>.

¹⁴ C.M. Steele, Steven J. Spencer and Joshua Aronson, "Contending with group image: The psychology of stereotype and social identity threat", in Mark. P. Zanna (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 34 (Amsterdam: Academic Press, 2002), pp. 379-440.

What to do if...?

...a student expresses the belief: “All Jews are Israelis and all Israelis are Jews!”?

Explain to the student that while Israel is home to millions of Jewish citizens, many Jewish people are citizens of other countries all over the world. In fact, the majority of Jews in the world today do not live in Israel, and only about 75 per cent of the Israeli population is Jewish (the remaining population are Muslims, including Bedouins, as well as Christians and Druze).¹⁵ This misunderstanding about the identity of the Jewish people can be a dangerous one, as it can lead to Jews being closely identified with the policies of the current government of Israel, or a spike in anti-Semitic incidents around the world in reaction to events taking place in Israel.

...a student says, “Jews all look the same. It’s easy to recognize them with their big noses and their black clothes.”?

It is important to stress the diversity of Jewish people and their physical traits, since Jews

Activity

A visit to a Jewish Museum, if there is one nearby, can be a great opportunity to highlight local Jewish heritage and its connections with local culture. Some cities organize Jewish walking tours that help to develop an appreciation for the roles and experiences of Jewish communities in the past and present.

include people from North America, Eastern and Western Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Asia and Africa, with a wide range of religious and cultural practices. A small minority of Orthodox Jews are considered ultra-Orthodox and wear distinct black clothing; since they are often the most visible, many people think that only ultra-Orthodox Jews are Jewish. The hook-nosed image comes from an unsympathetic caricature of “the Jew” in thirteenth century Europe that has been reproduced over time and remains one of the prevailing stereotypes today.

...a student applies any kind of name to Jews, such as “weird” or “strange”.

It is normal for people to find something unknown to be “strange”. Many students have not had the chance to get to know Jewish people, and they may only be familiar with very limited and generalized information. Understanding the

Activity

Organize a class visit to local Jewish cultural centre(s) so that students have the chance to meet people who do not fit a stereotypical image. Members of a local Jewish youth group could be invited to visit the class to speak about their families and traditions.

¹⁵ The Central Bureau of Statistics (Israel), “Monthly Bulletin of Statistics – October 2018”, <<https://www.cbs.gov.il/EN/pages/default.aspx>>.

Activity

Use holidays as an opportunity to learn about different traditions and histories. There are many parallel customs that can be found across religious traditions. For example, Passover and Easter tend to fall around the same time of year, as do Chanukah and Christmas. Also, all traditions practice some form of fasting: Ramadan in Islam, Yom Kippur in Judaism and Lent in Christianity. In small groups, students can engage in co-operative research on important elements of different religions that they then present to the class.

diversity of origins, of religious and secular movements, and of the ways in which Jewish people define themselves as Jews, can help to deconstruct basic prejudice. In general, the complexity of identity is often oversimplified in the media and advertising, and is not usually addressed in school. This can cause stereotypical approaches to become entrenched in society. Addressing such stereotypes makes most sense as part of a comprehensive, interactive and inclusive approach that looks at the diversity and richness of all identities, including

everyone's place in society and within the classroom.

Students who have had the occasion to share their own story are often more open to hearing the stories of others. It can also be difficult to relate to another person's history and traditions when a person is not clear about their own. Giving students the chance to explore their own backgrounds – including the elements they share with others and those that differ – can be a good way to introduce them to cultures that may not be represented in the class.

Resources and Materials for Further Reading

For more information on local Jewish museums or heritage, see:

- The Association of European Jewish Museums: www.aejm.org;
- Members of the Council of American Jewish Museums: www.cajm.net/members;
- European Routes of Jewish Heritage: www.jewishheritage.org/web/european-routes; and
- European Days of Jewish Culture, starts on the first Sunday of September each year: www.jewishheritage.org/web/edjc.

For more detailed information about Judaism, see:

- Judaism 101: www.jewfaq.org;
- My Jewish Learning: www.myjewishlearning.com; and
- “Judaism”, BBC website, www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism.

See also the following publications:

- David N. Myers, *Jewish History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017);
- Norman Solomon, *Judaism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2000); and
- Nicolas de Lange, *An Introduction to Judaism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

For a collection of short videos about Jewish heritage and contemporary life in a variety of cities around the world, see:

<http://jewishdiscoveries.com>.

For educational activities on Jewish customs, rites and rituals, see the website of A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe (CEJI):

www.ceji.org/?q=content/publications/educator_resources.

For lesson plans for teachers and activities for children, see:

<http://religions.mrdonn.org/judaism.html>.

Ideas on how to teach Judaism are available on the Guardian’s Teacher Network:

www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2016/jan/18/how-to-teach-judaism.

Online educational quizzes on Judaism are available here:

www.educationquizzes.com/us/specialist/judaism.

For lesson plans about Jewish life before World War II, see:

www.facinghistory.org/music-memory-and-resistance-during-holocaust/jewish-life-world-war-ii.

For lesson plans on “The Web of Community: Jewish Life before the War”, see:

www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/web-community-jewish-life-wars.

For examples of Jewish communities worldwide, see “Jews around the Globe”:

www.myjewishlearning.com/category/study/jewish-history/jews-around-the-globe.

Many national or local Jewish community organizations will provide basic cultural information on their websites.

