Lesson 5

To deepen your understanding of the ideas in this lesson, read Chapters One and Two in Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior.

Us and Them: Confronting Labels and Lies

WHY teach this material?

Rationale

One of the key learning goals of this unit is to help students develop an awareness of race as a myth that has been abused to justify discrimination and violence, not only against Jews but against many other groups as well. To that end, the purpose of this lesson is to help students reject the idea of Jews, or any group, as belonging to an inferior race. As students begin to learn about the Weimar Republic and the beginnings of the Nazi Party, they will come across language denigrating Jewish people and falsely referring to Jews as a race. They will learn that antisemitism—the discrimination against or persecution of Jews—was a cornerstone of the Nazi Party platform. Before students confront materials that show how others, namely Nazis and their followers, falsely labeled the Jewish community as an inferior race of people, it is important for students to understand how the Jewish community has defined itself as a diverse community of individuals who are connected to each other by history, beliefs, and/or culture—not by genetically-determined physical qualities or character traits. In the follow-through section of this lesson, students have the opportunity to explore the tension between group and individual identity, as they consider questions on the minds of many adolescents, such as: In what ways do I belong to a larger group? How do I "fit in" to a group while still maintaining my own identity? How does being part of a group define who I am? How do I impact the identity of the groups in which I belong? Thus, this lesson asks students to synthesize and apply all of the key ideas of the previous lessons—identity, membership, place, prejudice, and stereotypes—as they confront misinformation spread about Jews in the late 1800s. In this way, it provides an important bridge between the introductory section of this unit and the historical case study that follows in the next section.

LEARNING GOALS

The purpose of this lesson is to help students:

- Reflect on these **guiding questions**:
  - *What labels do I use to define myself? What labels do others use to define me?*
  - *What labels do Jews use to describe themselves?*
  - *What labels did some Germans use to describe Jews in the early 1900s?*
  - *Why do people make distinctions between "us" and "them"?*
  - *How is it possible to belong to a group yet to still be a unique individual?*
- Practice these **interdisciplinary skills**:
  - *Analyzing images*
  - *Gathering information from a lecture*
  - *Locating places on a map*
  - *Expressing ideas in writing and through discussion*

- Deepen understanding of these **key terms**:
  - *Jew*
  - *Aryan*
  - *Race*
  - *Religion*
  - *Antisemitism*

(See the main glossary in the unit's "Introduction" for definitions of these key terms.)

WHAT ideas does this lesson explore?

For most of their history, Jews have lived as a religious and cultural minority. Beginning more than four thousand years ago with Abraham's decision to worship one unseen god, the Jewish people (or Hebrews as they were called at the time) have distinguished themselves from their neighbors. While they originated as a religious group, the history of the Jewish people has resulted in a community that is difficult to categorize. Throughout ancient times, the Jewish people resided in the area which is now the modern state of Israel. In 70 CE, the Roman Empire conquered Palestine (the Roman name given to the area), and forced the Jewish people into exile. Given their proximity to land and sea routes leading to Africa, Asia, and Europe, the Jewish community spread all over the globe. As Jews moved to different regions, they often adopted the language and customs of their new home. Over centuries the Jewish people have grown into a diverse ethnic and cultural community who practice their religious beliefs in different ways. (Some Jews do not practice any faith, but identify as cultural Jews.) Today, between fourteen and fifteen million Jews live around the world; there are Jewish communities on every continent.

Because of this rich and complicated history, Jews themselves have struggled trying to answer the question, "What is a Jew?" Michael A. Meyer, a professor of Jewish history, writes:

> Long before the word became fashionable among psychoanalysts and sociologists, Jews in the modern world were obsessed with the subject of identity. They were confronted by the problem that Jewishness seemed to fit none of the usual categories. Until the establishment of the state of Israel, the Jews were not a nation, at least not in the political sense; being Jewish was different from being German, French, or American. And even after 1948 [the year the state of Israel was declared] most Jews remained nationally something other than Jewish. But neither could Jews define themselves by their religion alone. Few could ever seriously maintain that Judaism was, pure and simple, a religious faith on the model of Christianity. The easy answer was that Jewishness constituted some mixture of ethnicity and religion. But in what proportion? And was not the whole more than simply a compound of those two elements?[1]

Meyer explains how Jews do not fit neatly into any category. Jews represent a community of individuals who at times share religious, ethnic, national, language, or cultural characteristics, but in other instances might not. Because of this, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber argued that the Jews have defied all classification.[2] As a minority group that has often been misunderstood, Jews have been the subject of prejudice and persecution throughout their history. Antisemitism—the discrimination against Jews—has been

fueled by misinterpretations or fear of Jews' religious beliefs or cultural traditions that may differ from the beliefs and traditions of those in the majority.

As we have witnessed throughout history, and as students discussed in Lesson 4, groups do not only define themselves, but they are also defined by others. Increasingly, in the nineteenth century, people looked to science to define groups of people and justify their ideas about who was "in" and who was "out." This new approach to identifying people had profound effect on the Jewish community, especially the nearly nine million Jews living in Europe at that time. Some Europeans began defining Jews as a nation within the larger nation or even as a separate race—a people who shared common physical features and even character traits. Dozens of scientists in Europe and the United States set out to prove the superiority of the white race over all others. [Reputable scientists today argue that "race" as a biological or genetic category has no basis in scientific evidence.]

In Germany, Ernst Haeckel, a biologist, popularized "race science" by combining it with romantic ideas about the German national identity. In a book called *Riddle of the Universe*, he divided humankind into races and ranked each. People of European descent were called Aryans.* Not surprisingly, Aryans were at the top of his list and Jews and Africans at the bottom. Haeckel was also taken with the idea of eugenics—breeding "society's best with best"—as a way of keeping the "German race" pure. Scientists who tried to show that there was no "pure" race were ignored. In the late 1800s, the German Anthropological Society, under the leadership of Rudolph Virchow, conducted a study to determine if there really were racial differences between Jewish and "Aryan" children. After studying nearly seven million students, the society concluded that that the two groups were more alike than they were different. Historian George Mosse said of the study:

> This survey should have ended controversies about the existence of pure Aryans and Jews. However, it seems to have had surprisingly little impact. The idea of race had been infused with myths, stereotypes, and subjectivities long ago, and a scientific survey could change little. The idea of pure, superior races and the concept of a racial enemy solved too many pressing problems to be easily discarded. The survey itself was unintelligible to the uneducated part of the population. For them, Haeckel's *Riddles of the Universe* was a better answer to their problems.[3]

Popular reaction ignoring the results of this study raises questions about why so many Germans, and others throughout Europe and the United States, believed the notion of race, in general, and, more specifically in the myth that some races (i.e., Aryans or whites) are superior to others. Was it because the public was not aware of the evidence disproving racial theories, or were other motives at work, such as fear or opportunism, that encouraged many people, and even governments, to accept racist claims as truth?

Even though the lie that Jews, or any group for that matter, belonged to an inferior race was based on poorly executed and biased experiments, the fact that many Europeans, par-

*The word *Aryan* is a Sanskrit word meaning *noble*. In the eighteenth century, the label *Aryan* was used by linguists to refer to people who speak a number of Indo-European languages—languages believed to have originated in Iran and Northern India, including Greek, German, and Romance languages. Hitler and the Nazis manipulated the ideas of different anthropologists working in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century to create the theory that the Aryans were a race of Nordic people who successfully invaded India. According to Hitler, the Germans were direct descendants of these ancient Aryans. "Aryan," *AskOxford.com* website, http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/aryan?view=uk (accessed December 29, 2008). "Who Were the Aryans?" *About.com* website, http://archaeology.about.com/od/indusrivercivilizations/a/aryans.htm (accessed December 29, 2008).

ticularly Germans, believed this myth changed the future of the Jewish community, and of other groups labeled as "inferior." Having lived in Europe for nearly two thousand years, many European Jews had assimilated into the cultures of the nations in which they lived. In the late 1800s, when race science was gaining popularity, most German Jews defined themselves as being "from Germany," and their identities were shaped by the culture and geography of this place. Assimilated Jews living in Germany spoke German, volunteered for the German army, attended German schools and universities, listened to German music, and had participated in German sporting events. They were confident that once they were "more German" discrimination would end. Yet, racists turned "being Jewish" into a permanent, inferior condition. Neither assimilation nor conversion to Christianity altered one's race; Jews would always be Jews because they belonged to a different "race." This theory was used, at first, to justify discrimination against Jews, then the isolation of the Jewish community, and eventually the deaths of millions of Jewish children, women, and men. Thus, the story of the Jews in Europe in the early twentieth century is one of the most tragic examples of the human devastation that can result when a majority has the power to use stereotypes, fear, and bigotry to define people in a minority group.

While the Jews are central figures in the history of the events leading up to the Holocaust, this unit is not designed to be a comprehensive study of Judaism or of Jewish culture or history. Rather, the purpose of this unit is to teach students about the vulnerability of democracy, the significance of individual and group decision-making, the importance of critical thinking and informed judgment, and the role we can all play in preventing or perpetuating injustice. This particular story of discrimination and violence against European Jews in the 1930s and 1940s helps us learn about the factors that have motivated hatred and injustice against other minority groups in the past and today. Indeed, it is possible that some of your students have experienced belonging to a group that has been falsely labeled or misunderstood by others. Without drawing exact parallels to the specific circumstances faced by the Jewish community, we hope students come to see facets of their own experience echoed in the material they explore in this lesson and in the unit in general.

Related readings in
Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior
"The Effects of Religious Stereotyping," pp. 43–46
"Anti-Judaism: A Case Study in Discrimination," pp. 46–51
"'Race Science' in a Changing World," pp. 87–90
"Citizenship and European Jews," pp. 91–94
"'Race' and Identity in France," pp. 97–99

?HOW can we help students engage with this material?

Duration: one class period

Materials

Handout 1: How are they the same? How are they different?
Handout 2: The geography of Jewish identity timeline
Handout 3: Images of Polish Jews (1900–1930)

Handout 4: Those who don't: Confronting labels and lies about Jews

Opener

If students have not already had the opportunity to share their "Those Who Don't" stories, you can start this lesson by allowing volunteers to present their work. To help students grasp the purpose of this lesson, you might ask them to reflect on what might happen if they only shared the first part of their "Those Who Don't" stories with the class. Journal prompts you can use to guide their reflections include: What labels do you use to define yourself? What labels have others used to define you? How would it make you feel, or has it made you feel, to be falsely labeled by others? Can you identify any moments in history when individuals or groups were falsely labeled by others? Why do you think some people choose to believe lies and stereotypes?

Main Activities

Part 1: Understanding the Jewish people as a community with a shared religion and history, not as a race

Explain to students that in this lesson they will be learning more about how people ("us") sometimes assign labels to others ("them"). To begin this exploration, they will look at a collection of images of Jews from around the world (Handout 1) and list everything they think they "know" about this group of people just from looking at these photographs. At this point, do not tell students that these are pictures of Jewish people. Distribute the images to small groups of students and ask them to gather information about this group of people by answering the following questions:

- What do you think these individuals might have in common?
- In what ways do you think these individuals are different from one another?
- What more would you like to know about them?

Invite students to share their responses. Then inform students that one thing that unites all of these people into one group is that they are all Jews. How did this diverse group of people come to belong to the Jewish community? To help answer this question, present a brief presentation to students about Jewish identity. We suggest using a world map to guide students through the lecture. Students can take notes on Handout 2: The Geography of Jewish Identity Timeline.

Talking points for lecture: The Geography of Jewish Identity

[**Note:** In this lecture we use the term Israel/Palestine to refer to the land that is now the state of Israel but at the time of the Roman Empire was called Palestine.]

- It is commonly believed that Jewish history dates back almost 4,000 years when a man named Abraham became the first Jew. At a time when many people worshipped many gods in the form of idols, Abraham and his descendants believed in only one God who did not take any physical form. Abraham and his descendants (called Hebrews) lived in the Middle East, mostly in the area now known as Israel. This area has also been called Zion, Judea, and Palestine. From ancient times until today, the Jewish population has grown in two ways: people have become Jews by being born to a Jewish parent or by converting to Judaism. *Map skill: Where is the Middle East? Where is Israel?*
- In 70 CE (AD) the Roman Empire forced most of the Hebrews out of Israel/Palestine. The Romans believed they could better control people in the lands they conquered if they removed these people from their homelands. *Map skill: How big was the Roman Empire? What lands did the Romans govern? Why do you think Rome wanted to conquer the land of Israel/Palestine? (Hint: Rome wanted to expand its empire into the Middle East and Africa.)*
- As Jews migrated to different places around the world, they adopted local languages and took on regional customs and ways of life, while maintaining aspects of Jewish culture. Many Jews today still share a common set of religious beliefs. Others feel a sense of belonging to the Jewish community because of a shared history or ancestry (such as having Jewish parents), because they speak Hebrew (the language of ancient Jews) or because they celebrate Jewish holidays. *Map skill: The Jewish people in the photographs you just viewed come from Uganda, the United States, Yemen, Italy, Russia, Israel, Ethiopia, and China. Locate these areas on the map.*
- When the Romans forced the Jews out of Israel/Palestine, most of them moved to Europe. By 1900, almost nine million Jews lived in Europe. *Map skill: What routes do you think Jews took when they were forced to leave Israel/Palestine? How does looking at the map help us understand one reason why large Jewish communities developed in certain areas? (Hint: Many Jews eventually ended up in North Africa and Europe because these were the easiest routes from the Middle East.)*

As Esperanza pointed out in the story "Those Who Don't," while outsiders may think everyone in a group is the same, groups are actually made up of individuals with distinct characteristics. It would be misleading to think all Jewish people are the same, just as it would be misleading to think that all girls or all Americans are the same. To emphasize this point, you can have students analyze pictures of European Jews taken before World War II (see handout 3). In small groups or as a large class students can discuss the following questions:

- What do you think these individuals might have in common?
- In what ways do you think these individuals are different from one another?
- What more would you like to know about them?
- Which image reminds you of an experience from your own life? How so?

Besides helping students see the Jews as individuals, not just as a group, viewing these images encourages students to see European Jews as human beings enjoying experiences many students can relate to, such as holiday dinners with family or laughing with friends. Later in this unit, as students learn about how the Nazis used policies and propaganda to dehumanize Jews, you can remind them of these images of Jews as individuals with feelings, relationships, jobs, and hobbies.

Part 2: Identifying the lie perpetuated by the Nazis—that the Jews belonged to an inferior race of people

Inform students that in this unit, they will learn about a time in history when many groups were victims of discrimination and prejudice—especially the European Jews like the ones in the photographs they just viewed. Students may have some familiarity with the idea of discrimination from studying American History, particularly slavery and the civil rights movement. To connect to students' prior knowledge, you might ask them to share what they know about discrimination in the United States. This would be an appropriate time to introduce the term antisemitism—the hatred of and discrimination against Jewish people.

Students often ask why the Jews were victims of discrimination in Europe before and during World War II. To fully answer this question requires an understanding of historic antisemitism dating back thousands of years. Because they lived as a minority with different traditions and beliefs than the majority, Jews have been victims of lies and labels for centuries. For the purposes of this lesson (and this unit), it is critical that students understand one of those lies—a lie disseminated in Europe in the late 1800s that the Jews belong to an inferior racial group. This lie formed the basis of the Nazis' policies toward Jews, policies that ultimately resulted in the extermination of two-thirds of European Jewry.

To reveal this lie, share the following quotations with students. Before you share these words, make sure students understand that they express the view of certain Germans in the early twentieth century. Because many students may not be familiar with the term *Aryan*, you may want to define it before they read the quotation. [In the 1800s, many Germans believed that they belonged to a superior racial group—the Aryan race—which originated in India.]

> People can be sorted by races—groups that are genetically different from one another. Some races are superior to others. For example, the Aryan is superior to the Jew.*
>
> Thou shalt keep thy blood pure. Consider it a crime to soil the noble Aryan breed of thy people by mingling it with the Jewish breed. For thou must know that Jewish blood is everlasting, putting the Jewish stamp on body and soul unto the farthest generations. . . . Avoid all contact and community with the Jew and keep him away from thyself and thy family, especially thy daughters, lest they suffer injury of body and soul.**
>
> In the late 1800s, the German Anthropological Society conducted a study of seven million students to discover differences between Aryan [non-Jewish] children and Jewish children. They found that these students were more alike than they were different. But, the idea of racial differences had become so ingrained that many people ignored the results of this research.[4]

*This statement reflects the ideas expressed by race scientists such as Sir Francis Galton and Eugen Fischer. In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler articulated the idea that the Aryans were a superior race. "All the human culture, all the results of art, science and technology that we see before us today, are almost exclusively the creative product of the Aryan," he wrote. "This very fact admits of the not unfounded inference that he alone was the founder of all higher humanity, therefore representing the prototype of all that we understand by the word 'man.'" He also labeled the Jews as a race, writing, "The Jew has always been a people with definite racial characteristics and never a religion." These ideas became a cornerstone of Nazi ideology.
**In 1883, Theodor Fritsch published *The Racists' Decalogue* to explain how a good "German" should treat "Jews." This was excerpted from an English translation of that publication. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 350.

After you read these statements aloud, ask students to complete the first part of handout 4. This handout uses the same "Those Who Don't" structure from Lesson 4 to help students understand the difference between how Nazis defined Jews in the 1900s and how the Jewish community defines itself. From these quotations, students should recognize that "Those who don't know any better" labeled Jews as a race of people. Because they believed race was a trait carried in one's blood, they thought being Jewish "is everlasting" and could not be altered by conversion or assimilation. They also thought that Jews were inferior. So, they did not want their inferior blood to mix with Aryan superior blood. Then, students can complete the rest of the handout (the "But we know" section) with information that they have learned in this lesson about Jewish identity. Their ideas might come from the images of Jews around the world, the lecture on Jewish identity, or the images of Jews in pre–World War II Europe.

Follow-Through (in class or at home)

When Esperanza refers to people who stereotype her community as "those who don't know any better,"[5] she assumes that if they "knew better"—for example, if they had the opportunity or took the time to know the people in her neighborhood—they would not mislabel her neighbors as dangerous. Yet, a study of history reveals that prejudice and discrimination is more complicated; prejudice cannot simply be explained by lack of information. Sometimes people have information, yet still choose to believe lies and stereotypes. For example, the German Anthropological Society distributed the results of their study that showed that Jews and Aryans are more the same than different. But many Germans chose to believe in the separateness and inferiority of Jews, despite this evidence to the contrary. To debrief this part of the lesson, you might ask students to think about the question: What other reasons, besides ignorance or unfamiliarity, might cause people to mislabel others? Reviewing the journal entries they wrote at the beginning of this lesson might help students answer this question.

One of the goals of this lesson is to help students understand the complex relationship between the individual and the community—that although groups share common characteristics they are still made up of individuals with distinct identities. As a final activity, students can reflect on their own experience as members of groups. Journal prompts include: Identify a group to which you belong. In what ways are the members of this group the same? In what ways are the members of this group different? Is it a problem if someone believes that everyone who belongs to a group is exactly the same? Why or why not?

Assessment(s)

To ensure that students do not come away from this unit believing the racist lies spread by the Nazis, it is critical that students demonstrate an understanding of the fact that the Jews are not a race of people and that there is no scientific basis to support the theory that some groups of people are genetically superior to others. Students' responses on "Handout 4: Confronting labels and lies about Jews" should reveal their understanding of the Jewish community as a diverse community of individuals, not as a racial group. If students are having a hard time understanding that Jews are not a race, emphasize the facts that anyone could convert to Judaism and that Jews do not share physical traits. When evaluating students' responses in the follow-through activities, look for answers where students are recognizing the differences within groups. Push students to avoid making sweeping generalizations about groups of people.

Extensions

- The photographs students analyzed of Jews in pre-war Europe show people in poses that are familiar—at family parties or huddling with groups of friends. To help students connect to Jews in pre-war Europe as "regular people," you can ask students to bring in a photograph of themselves or of family members that reminds them of a photograph they saw in class today.

- This lesson presented an extremely brief history of Jewish people. Students may want to learn more about Jewish history, especially about the history of Jews in Memphis. Today, nearly 10,000 Jews live in the Memphis and Shelby County area (comprising approximately 1% of the total population). The Goldring/Waldenburg Institute of Southern Jewish Life has written a short history of Jews in Memphis which can be found on their website: *http://www.msje.org/history/archive/tn/memphis.html*. The book *A Biblical People in the Bible Belt: The Jewish Community of Memphis, Tennessee, 1840s–1860s* by Selma S. Lewis is another useful resource for learning about the Jewish community in Memphis. This book can be borrowed from Facing History's library.

- The purpose of this lesson is to help students reject the idea of Jews, or any group, as belonging to an inferior race. In using the concept of race, we do not mean to legitimize it as a truthful scientific category. Race is a category invented by people for the purpose of creating social hierarchies. Respected scientists agree that there is no scientific basis to support the theory that some groups of people are genetically superior or inferior to others. Moreover, recent DNA research confirms that humans from around the world are more alike than they are different, and that having similar skin tone (often used as the basis for racial classification) does not necessarily indicate that individuals share other genetic traits. For more information about the meaning of race and how the concept of race has been used and abused, refer to the excellent PBS website, *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (*http://www.pbs.org/race/*). The website is a companion to the film *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, which you can borrow from Facing History's library. Facing History's resource book, *Race and Membership in American History: The Eugenics Movement*, provides additional information about a time when people falsely believed that some races, classes, or groups of people were superior to others, and how this belief led to discrimination and human rights abuses. This book can be downloaded from Facing History's website or borrowed from our library.

- To help students gain a deeper understanding of the history of antisemitism in Europe, you can have them read the short novel *The Boy of Old Prague* by Sulamith Ish-Kishor. In this story, Tomas, a young boy living in the 1500s, has been taught to be suspicious and even hateful of Jews. Tomas's beliefs are challenged when his master sends him to work for a Jew in the ghetto. See pages 294–97 of the *Holocaust and Human Behavior* resource book for a discussion of this novel. Class sets of *The Boy of Old Prague* can be borrowed from Facing History's library.

How are they the same? How are they different?

Directions: Look at these images on the following three pages and then answer the questions at the bottom of the page.

How are they the same? How are they different?

How are they the same? How are they different?

What do you think these individuals might have in common?
In what ways do you think these individuals are different from one another?
What more would you like to know about them?

Lesson 5: Handout 2

The geography of Jewish identity timeline

4000 BCE:

70 CE:

1900:

Images of Polish Jews (1900–1930)

Images of Polish Jews (1900–1930)

Directions: After reviewing the eight images of Jews, answer the following questions:

1. What do you think these individuals might have in common?

2. In what ways do you think these individuals are different from one another?

3. What more would you like to know about them?

4. Which image can you relate to the most? Which image reminds you of an experience from your own life? Explain.

Those Who Don't: Confronting labels and lies about Jews

Directions: Use this handout to reveal the differences between lies spread about Jews by "those who don't know any better" and ideas about Jewish identity supported by historical evidence.

Those who don't know any better or who chose to believe the labels and lies spread by some Germans thought that Jews . . .

But we know that Jewish people . . .

Notes

[1] Michael A. Meyer, *Jewish Identity in the Modern World* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 3.
[2] Martin Buber, "The Jew in the World," *Israel and the World: Essays in a Time of Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 167–72.
[3] George Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1978), 92.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 28.