

Forging Jewish Identity as a Minority

Overview

About This Lesson

In this two-day lesson, students will first reflect on their own multiple cultural identities and those of their peers by thinking about how their cultural identities are expressed in their homes. Next, using a video and images that illustrate the diversity of Jewish identity, they will consider its complexity. On the second day, students will focus on how dominant societies impact the identities of minorities. After hearing from psychologist Jonathan Amaechi in a video clip, they will contemplate which identities they feel comfortable sharing and which they keep hidden. Finally, after reading about the origins of Hanukkah, students will consider what it entails to maintain a minority cultural identity in a dominant culture.

Guiding Questions

- What are some ways that our multiple cultural identities are expressed in our homes?
- What are some ways that Jews define their identities?
- What circumstances allow us to safely share our various identities? What circumstances cause us to protect aspects of our identities by hiding them?
- What does the story of Hanukkah tell us about the struggle to maintain one's identity when others wish to suppress, ignore, or devalue it?

Learning Objectives

- Explore multiple ways an individual can identify as Jewish.
- Reflect on and articulate our own complex identities.
- Consider when and where it feels safe to express various identities and when we feel we must suppress or hide aspects of our identities.
- Examine the effects of cultural assimilation, preservation, resistance, suppression, and acculturation on a minority identity in a dominant culture.
- Draw connections between the historical origins of Hanukkah and contemporary Jewish identity.

What's Included

This lesson uses the following student materials. Access handouts and reading in this [Google Folder](#).

- Handout: **Jewish Identity Artifacts**
- Handout: **Home Indicators of Cultural Identity Chart**
- Reading: **Jewish Life in Greece Before the Holocaust**
- Video: [Types of Jews](#)
- Video: [John Amaechi Discusses Identity](#)

Additional Context & Background

When educators tackle hard topics like antisemitism in a Jewish educational setting, it is not uncommon for students, particularly in middle school, to ask, “Why does everyone hate us?” As educators, we need to make space for narratives that counterbalance the long and often painful history of persecution that Jews have endured as they have defended and maintained their Jewish identity within dominant cultures. Indeed, amplifying the multiple ways of being Jewish is a form of resistance to contemporary antisemitism today. This amplification can be achieved by providing space for students to look both inward at their own diverse Jewish identities and outward at representations of Jewishness beyond their own identities. This lesson allows students to consider the universal and the particular by using a Jewish historical context to examine how minority identities operate within dominant cultures—how and where they thrive and how and where they are suppressed.

The origins of the holiday of Hanukkah include the military victory of a small minority against a mighty aggressor and a historical understanding of how modernity (new ways of thinking that emerged around 160 B.C.E.) challenged Jewish preservation of tradition and inspired innovation. The historical roots of the Hanukkah celebration serve as a vibrant example of “Jews’ refusal to surrender their identity and values.”¹ The Hanukkah story reveals both a tension within the Jewish community around what Judaism should look like and tension between Jews and Greeks around adopting the dominant culture. As Rabbi Mark Asher Goodman explains, Hanukkah is “about a minority group that was different from the majority in the dominant culture. And the dominant majority culture said, ‘We’d like you to fit in better or go away.’ And the Jews said, ‘No, that’s not how we roll.’”² The continuity and fluidity of Jewish identity from these historical examples to contemporary times is highlighted in Hanukkah’s theme of Jewish resistance and resilience.

Preparing to Teach

A Note to Teachers

1. Validating Different Expressions of Jewish Identity

The opening activity of this lesson is intended to celebrate Jewish diversity. However, it is possible that some students may feel self-conscious and worry about how their peers or teachers may view their Jewish identity.

Understanding modern Jewish identity requires an intentional departure from the commonly accepted twentieth-century narrative that defined Jewishness in terms of religious observance and as an outcome of formal Jewish education.³ Today, Jewish peoplehood and identity exist

¹ Tara Isabella Burton, “[Why Hanukkah’s message of Jewish resilience matters so much after Pittsburgh](#),” Vox, Nov. 29, 2018.

² Ibid.

³ Jon A. Levisohn and Ari Y. Kelman, eds., *Beyond Jewish Identity: Rethinking Concepts and Imagining Alternatives* (Academic Studies Press, 2019).

beyond religious and educational affiliations and incorporate multiple intersectional identities. Today's Jews live in a complex world that demands broad-minded thinking about Jewish identity. In "[Creating Support Structures for Jewish Diversity](#)," Jewish educators Yael Krieger, Roni Ben-David, and Lauren Cook reflect further on the significant outcomes to be gained by including diverse and complex representations of Jewish identity in our curriculum:

We continue to audit our Jewish studies curriculum, looking for how to more fully present the variety of expressions of Jewish peoplehood, which includes representations of Jewish men and women from a variety of heritages. How can we amplify the voices of different types of Jews? It is vital that we provide our students with "mirrors" to see themselves and other stories/histories of Jews of color. When done well, students are given many opportunities to process difficult experiences; feel affirmed in having felt pressure to prove their Jewishness or choose between different parts of themselves; see that they are not alone, that they have the power to lift up others and be lifted up; feel equal claim to their Jewish identity even if it isn't rooted in lineage; and confront the assumption that Jews of color are part of one uniform group, that they only exist within binary of "Jews of color" or Jew. Moreover, they can see themselves as potential leaders in the Jewish community with the insights and self-awareness that our community must value and learn from.⁴

Modeling openness to and validation of all of your students' different expressions of Jewish identity will help to reinforce the intended celebratory nature of the activities in Day 1 of this lesson.

Before teaching the following activities, consider revisiting your classroom norms with your students or [creating a class contract](#) together if you have not done so already. Your contract should also make it clear that, while you encourage the expression of different viewpoints and diverse voices, members of your community are responsible for maintaining an environment that respects the dignity and humanity of all. Consider how you and your students can respond if someone in your class violates your norms—for instance, by communicating judgment about how a peer expresses their Jewish identity.

Lesson Plan

Activities

Day 1

1. Starting With Ourselves: Reflecting on Our Multiple Cultural Identities

Ask students to close their eyes and imagine approaching the front door of their home. Take them through the following exercise as their eyes remain closed:

Open the front door of your home. Look to the left and right. What are you seeing? Is there art on the wall? What is it? What style? Where does it come from, or does it represent a special

⁴ Yael Krieger, Roni Ben-David, and Lauren Cook, "[Creating Support Structures for Jewish Diversity](#)," *Prizmah: In These Times* (Winter 2019).

place? As you look around the inside of your house, are there photographs? Who is in the photographs? Is there a place where keys or things from pockets are tossed? Go there. What do you find? Tickets from an event? Which one? Invitations? To what? Candy wrappers? What kind? Walk further into your house. What else is on your walls and shelves? Are there books nearby? Which books? Are there Jewish objects on display? What are they? If a meal is being made when you walk in, is there a particular scent from a spice or food that is familiar to you? What sounds do you hear in your home? Is there music playing? What kind of music? Are there people talking? Who is talking? What language are they speaking? What other sounds do you hear?

Ask students to open their eyes and begin filling out their **Home Indicators of Cultural Identity Chart**. It is fine if students do not fill out all four categories of the chart, but encourage them to fill out two boxes at minimum.

Next, have students debrief their findings using the [Think-Pair-Share](#) teaching strategy.

1. **Think:** Provide this definition of *culture*: “a set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and/or practices that characterizes a group.” Explain that our homes often reveal our families’ various cultural identities. Provide a few examples that span religious, ethnic, political, and social/cultural identities. Ask students to look at their answers on the Home Indicators of Cultural Identity chart and think about how many different cultures they might identify with (e.g., Middle Eastern, Eastern European, Jewish, American, urban, coastal, African, South American, Persian, LGBTQIA).
2. **Pair and Share:** Ask students to discuss the following questions with another student or two.
 - What cultures do you identify with?
 - What similarities and differences do you see between your partner’s cultural identities and your own?
 - What do you think the Home Indicators of Cultural Identity chart can tell us about how and where we express our identities and cultures?
 - What answers on your Home Indicators of Cultural Identity chart do you associate with your Jewish identity?

If time allows, consider closing this activity by having students either share their answers with the class or journal a completion to one of the following sentence stems: “I am uniquely Jewish because I . . .” or “Each person in my class is uniquely Jewish because we . . .”

2. Reflecting on the Complexity of Jewish Identity

First, as a whole class, have students view the short video [Types of Jews](#) (1:38). Next, display the images and captions from this handout, **Jewish Identity Artifacts**, featuring Jewish cultural objects from around the world. Ask students to think about whether or not they connect personally with any of the Jewish identities or objects presented. Next, share the following two quotes with students:

“There are seventy faces to the Torah.”⁵

“To be Jewish means different things to different people. We see in our modern world that there are Jews who connect to Judaism through religious observance or spirituality or culture or tribalism or study, and so many others. To understand pluralism within the Jewish community, we need to understand and appreciate a range of Jewish identities, even if we don’t subscribe to them ourselves.”

—Rabbi Eric Leiderman, Jewish Educator and President & Co-Founder of Masorti On Campus⁶

Ask students how the first quote might apply to the complexity of Jewish identity.

Next, engage the whole class in a discussion centered around the following questions. As students share their answers, you may choose to note whether their ideas fall under race, geography, genealogy, ethnicity, religion, peoplehood, or other categories of identity.

- Using evidence from the Home Indicators of Cultural Identity chart, the video, and the slide of cultural objects, what are different ways that individuals can identify as Jewish?
- Considering the similarities and differences among us in the ways our homes express our cultural identities, including our Jewish identities, how is it that Jews can identify differently and yet still be Jews?
- Referring to the Leiderman quote, what might it look like to “understand and appreciate a range of Jewish identities” beyond our own?
- Do certain Jewish identities dominate the non-Jewish world’s perception of Jews? If so, what factors contribute to who is and isn’t perceived as Jewish in the dominant society?

Day 2

1. The Identities We Hide and Share

Watch the video [John Amaechi Discusses Identity](#) (3:10–5:59) beginning at timestamp 3:10. In this video, psychologist John Amaechi discusses the importance of creating classroom environments where students can bring their whole selves (and all of their identities) with them. Amaechi uses the metaphor of a suit to describe the ways in which people protect themselves from judgment, ridicule, exclusion, and even violence by hiding certain parts of themselves in unsafe environments.

After viewing, ask students to respond in their [journals](#) to one or both of the following questions:

⁵ Numbers Rabbah 13:15.

⁶ “[Building Jewish Pluralism](#)” (Hillel Milwaukee), Sefaria.org.

- When do you feel safe sharing the parts of you that you often keep “zipped up”? Describe that environment or those circumstances.
- Do the identities you generally share openly ever become “zipped up”? Under what circumstances might that occur?

2. Fighting to Preserve Identity: The Story of Hanukkah

Distribute the short reading **Jewish Life in Greece Before the Holocaust**, which describes the historical events in ancient Greece that led to the celebration of Hanukkah. Students will read a portion of this reading and practice [annotating strategies](#) to identify examples of cultural preservation, resistance, acculturation, and assimilation. If you need to adjust the timing of this lesson, ask students to read just the second paragraph.

Make sure your students can define the following terms before they read:

- *Assimilate*: Adopt the dominant society's values, behaviors, rituals, and beliefs *in place of* one's birth or given culture
- *Acculturate*: Adopt all of, or aspects of, the dominant culture *while retaining* all or aspects of one's birth or given culture

Students may read and annotate individually or in small groups. Provide the following instructions for annotation before they begin:

- Read paragraphs two, three, and four from **Jewish Life in Greece Before the Holocaust**. Use two different colored pens, pencils, or highlighters to annotate the text.
 - Choose one color to underline evidence that illustrates Jews retaining (keeping) aspects of Jewish religion and culture.
 - Choose another color to underline evidence that illustrates Jews assimilating into the dominant Greek culture.
 - With any color, draw a circle around words or phrases that show Greeks forcing Greek culture or religion on the Jewish minority.

Next, present the following excerpt from the Facing History resource [Anti-Judaism Before the Enlightenment](#):

Throughout much of the faith's history, Jews lived in territories ruled by other groups. They were often treated as 'the Other' and made scapegoats for calamities and misfortunes suffered by societies in which they lived. Continuous rumors, lies, myths, and misinformation about Jews have existed throughout history, and many of them persist in the contemporary world. Often this hatred has led to violence.

Both the reading “Jewish Life in Greece Before the Enlightenment” and the excerpt from “Anti-Judaism Before the Enlightenment” illustrate ways a dominant society can react when a

minority culture within it preserves some or all of its cultural identity. Have students respond to the following questions. You may consider using a [graffiti board](#) or having them first write responses on sticky notes and then add them to a collective board.

- From what you read, what are some of the different ways that dominant cultures have treated Jews?
- What are some of the different ways that Jews have responded to living within a dominant culture?

Closure

Students may complete the sentence stem below using various methods: privately in a journal, sharing out to the whole class or small groups, or writing down an answer that can be displayed in the classroom. Determine what will be the best method for your students.

“While it can be complicated to be a minority group living within a dominant culture, the preservation of my unique Jewish identity is important, rewarding, and valuable because . . .”