

WHO ARE THE JEWISH PEOPLE?

UNDERSTANDING JEWISH IDENTITY, PEOPLEHOOD, AND CONTINUITY



Time: Two or three class periods of 50-60 minutes each

Audience: 9-12 grade (adaptable for Middle School)

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How have the Jewish people maintained a shared identity across thousands of years while living in many different places?

To answer this question, students first explore the many factors that contribute to collective identity and peoplehood before examining the Jewish experience as a historical case study. Throughout the lesson, they return to this guiding question as they gather evidence and reflect on the characteristics, experiences, and traditions that have connected the Jewish people across generations and geographic boundaries.

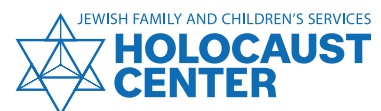
LESSON OVERVIEW

Students often encounter references to the Jewish people in courses on ancient civilizations, world religions, the Holocaust, modern history, and current events; however, many of those students have little background knowledge about Jewish identity beyond religious beliefs or isolated historical events.

Rather than viewing Judaism as a religion or the Jewish people solely as members of a faith community, through this lesson students will investigate the many interconnected elements that contribute to Jewish identity, including shared ancestry, history, culture, traditions, language, and enduring connections to the Land of Israel.

Note: This lesson can serve as a starting point for broader studies of Jewish history and provides a conceptual foundation for future lessons on antisemitism, the Holocaust, Israel, contributions of Jewish individuals throughout history, and contemporary Jewish communities.

**CENTER FOR
JEWISH PEOPLEHOOD**



STUDENT OUTCOMES

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to

- Describe Jewish identity and peoplehood as a combination of shared history, ancestry, culture, traditions, and religion.
- Explain how Jewish peoplehood has been maintained across thousands of years despite migration and geographic dispersion.
- Identify examples of both diversity and continuity within Jewish communities around the world.
- Use primary sources to support historical claims about Jewish identity.
- Apply key academic vocabulary related to Jewish identity and history.
- Consider why learning about Jewish identity is important.

Aligned Standards (California Common Core)

CA.HSS.6.3.4 – Discuss the locations of the settlements and movements of Hebrew peoples, including the Exodus, the movement to and from Egypt, and the significance of Jerusalem as the capital of the Kingdom of Israel.

CA.HSS.6.3.5 – Discuss how the Jewish diaspora occurred and how Jewish identity was preserved despite the loss of the Jewish homeland and temple.

Additional aligned literacy and history standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2, RH.6-8.7

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1, RH.9-10.2, RH.9-10.7

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1, RH.11-12.2, RH.11-12.7

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.1, SL.6-8.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1, SL.9-10.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.11-12.1, SL.11-12.2

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.1, WHST.6-8.2, WHST.6-8.9

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.1, WHST.9-10.2, WHST.9-10.9

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.1, WHST.11-12.2, WHST.11-12.9

MATERIALS

Opening Activity: [What Is Peoplehood?](#)

Vocabulary Activity (Complete before viewing the video)

Video: “Who Are The Jews?”

Guided Video Reflection: “Who Are Jews?”

Gallery Walk: What Does Jewish Peoplehood Look Like? Materials / Activity

Primary Sources Jigsaw Activity

[Lesson Reflection / Exit Ticket](#)

[Final Writing Assessment](#)

TEACHER PREPARATION

Before teaching this lesson, teachers should:

- **Review** [Opening Activity: What Is Peoplehood?](#)
- **Watch the video** “[Who Are the Jews?](#)” in its entirety. Consider pausing the video at natural transition points to allow students time to record observations and discuss evidence. The [Guided Video Reflection: “Who Are Jews?”](#) includes timestamps for ease of use.
- **Review** the activities and final writing assessment; adjust as needed.

Please note: All student activities will help students build up to a final writing assessment.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Allow students to demonstrate understanding through an oral explanation, a concept map, or a visual representation showing the factors that connect the Jewish people.
- Pre-teach key vocabulary using visuals and student-friendly definitions.
- Provide sentence frames to support discussion and writing.
- Use graphic organizers to help students categorize evidence about Jewish identity (history, religion, culture, language, ancestry, shared traditions, etc.).
- Pair English learners with supportive peers during source analysis and discussions.
- Include maps, photographs, timelines, and short video clips to reinforce key concepts.
- Allow students to discuss ideas with a partner before sharing with the class or writing independently.
- Break the lesson into clearly defined sections with frequent check-ins.
- Provide guided notes or partially completed graphic organizers during source analysis.
- Read complex texts aloud or provide audio versions when available.
- Chunk longer readings into smaller sections with guiding questions.
- Allow additional processing and completion time.

ASSESSMENT(S)

- Vocabulary activity
- Gallery Walk activity
- Contributions to class discussion
- Guided viewing responses
- Lesson reflection and exit ticket
- Summative writing assessment

WHAT IS PEOPLEHOOD?

1. Answer the following questions:

What makes a group of people more than just individuals?

What kinds of things can connect people across generations?

Can people belong to the same group even if they live in different countries? Why or why not?

What characteristics might connect a people over hundreds or even thousands of years?

2. Select a minimum of four characteristics listed below that have helped build your own sense of “peoplehood,” and give examples from your own life:

☐ Shared ancestry

☐ Shared history

☐ Religion

☐ Culture

☐ Traditions

☐ Language

☐ Homeland

☐ Family

☐ Food

☐ Music

☐ Shared memories

☐ Values

Which are the most important for you and your family?

ACTIVITY 1

Primary Sources Jigsaw

Overview

In this jigsaw activity, students analyze one of four primary sources spanning different eras and regions, each illustrating a dimension of Jewish peoplehood—identity, history, culture, religion, or community. Students then teach their findings to classmates, building a shared understanding through collective inquiry.

Teacher Preparation

Print the four primary sources (with historical background) and place one at each station. Print one Student Note-Taker per student.

Instructions

- Divide the class into four groups, one per station.
- Give groups 10 minutes to examine their source, read the background, and complete the Note-Taker.
- Reconvene; each group presents its source and what it reveals about Jewish peoplehood, citing evidence.
- Discuss as a class, comparing sources and identifying the dimensions of peoplehood they represent.

Optional Extension

Rotate groups to a second station for a repeat analysis, then compare both sources before a final class discussion.

Discussion Questions

- What similarities appear across the sources?
- What differences stand out?
- What dimensions of Jewish peoplehood emerge from all four?

STUDENT NOTE-TAKER: PRIMARY SOURCES JIGSAW

Name: _____ Date: _____

Primary Source #: _____

Title of Source: _____

As you examine your assigned primary source, use the questions below to guide your analysis. Support your responses with evidence from the source and the accompanying historical background.

Observe

1. What type of primary source is this?

☐ Artifact ☐ Photograph ☐ Document ☐ Artwork ☐ Other:

2. What details stand out to you? What do you notice first?

Analyze

3. Where and when does this source come from?

4. What does this source tell us about the people, place, event, or practice it represents?

5. What historical context helps explain why this source is significant?

Interpret

6. What does this source reveal about Jewish life, beliefs, traditions, or experiences?

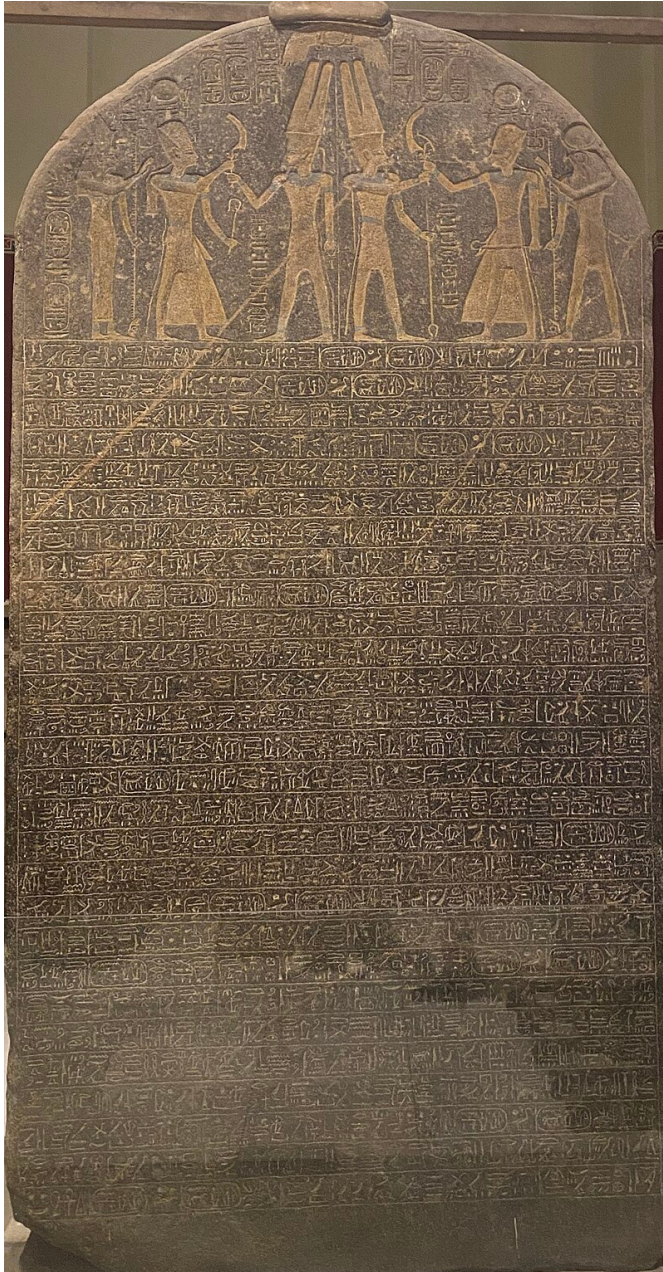
7. What does this source teach you about Jewish peoplehood? Use evidence from the source to support your thinking.

Prepare to Share

Be ready to explain your source to the class in 1–2 minutes. Include:

- What is this source?
- What is its historical significance?
- What does it reveal about Jewish peoplehood?
- What evidence from the source supports your conclusions?

STATION 1: MERNEPTAH STELE



Label

Merneptah Stele
Middle (Classical) Egyptian;
hieroglyphic
Stelae and Reliefs of Pharaoh
Merneptah, c. 1207 BCE
Cairo Museum, Cairo, Egypt

The Merneptah Stele is a large granite slab, over ten feet high, that recounts victories of the pharaoh Merneptah, who reigned from 1213 to 1203 BCE, over enemies in ancient Libya and Canaan. The pharaoh boasts of his many conquests and declares, in the stele's last three lines, that "Israel is laid waste—its seed is no more." Most scholars agree that the hieroglyphs imply that "Israel" refers to a seminomadic or rural people. It is considered the first textual reference to ancient Israel outside of the Bible. The scene at the top shows the pharaoh receiving a sword, surrounded by various gods and goddesses. The stele was discovered in the ancient Egyptian city of Thebes in 1896 and is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

STATION 2: OIL LAMP FROM KERALA SYNAGOGUE



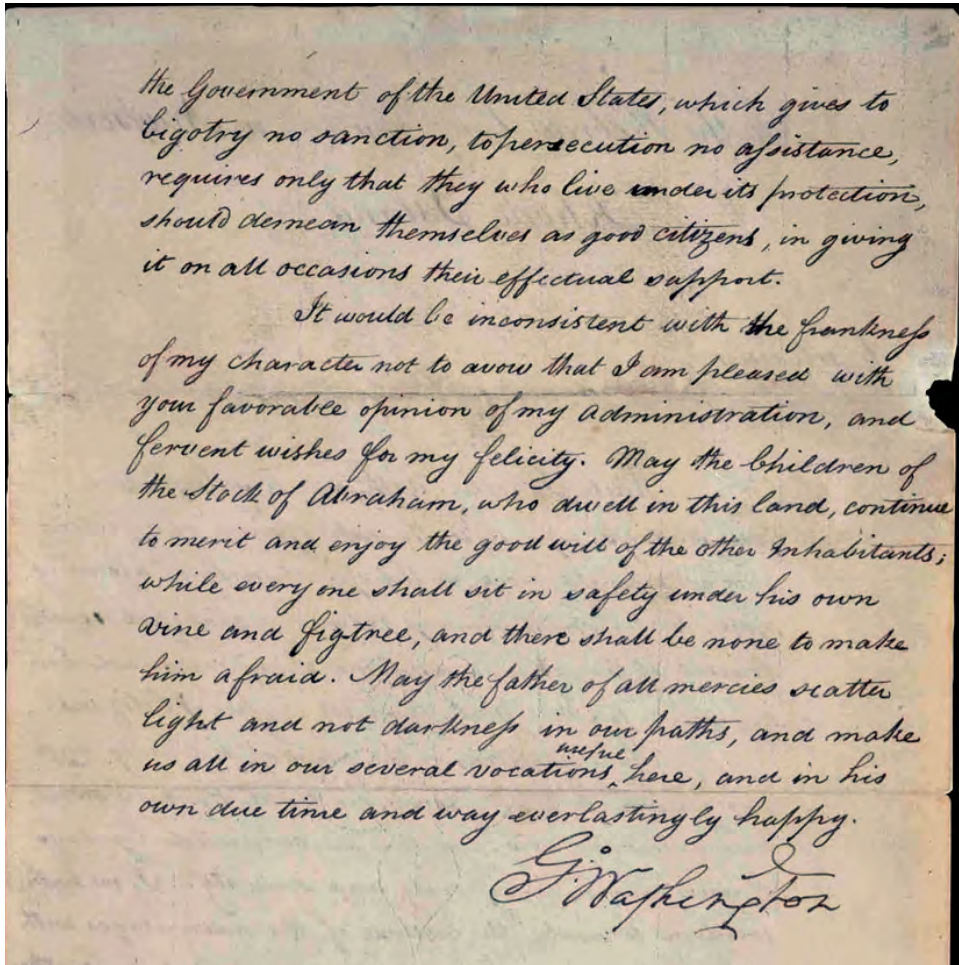
Label

Hanging lamp
Hebrew, Malayalam
India, Parur, Kerala, 1670
Bronze
Gift of the Jewish Community
of Parur, Kerala, India, The
Magnes Collection of Jewish
Art and Life, UC Berkeley,
77.343

This hanging bronze oil lamp, made in 1670, comes from the Jewish community in Parur, Kerala, in southern India. Tradition traces the arrival of Jews in India to the time of King Solomon, around 970 BCE; the Jews in Kerala likely trace their beginnings to the 15th and 16th centuries and the expulsion of Jews from Spain. The lamp's Hebrew inscription states "This is a lamp that was given by Baruch son the honorable Rabbi David Ashkenazi as a gift from his mother for the sanctity of Parur." An inscription in Malayalam (a language spoken primarily in the Indian state of Kerala) records the lamp's likely maker, Muchiri Pangan. It was designed to burn for 24 hours during Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. With its distinctive top and ring, its design is unique to the Jews of Kerala.

Oil lamps like this were often used as a ner tamid ("eternal light") in synagogues. The ner tamid, which burns continuously near the Torah scrolls, symbolizes God's enduring presence and recalls the eternal lamp that burned in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem. Today, the ner tamid continues to connect Jewish communities with a tradition that has endured for thousands of years.

STATION 3: GEORGE WASHINGTON'S LETTER TO TOURO SYNAGOGUE



Label

George Washington's Letter
to Touro Synagogue
English
Newport, Rhode Island, 1790
Paper
Loeb Visitors Center

George Washington's 1790 letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport is a landmark document in the history of religious freedom. Written after his visit to Newport, Rhode Island—where Moses Seixas, warden of the Touro Synagogue, welcomed him on behalf of the community—the letter answered Seixas's hope for religious tolerance with a clear promise: the new nation, unlike the regimes of Europe, would have no official religion. Washington affirmed that the government "gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

The letter text:

Gentlemen,

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection of the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and happy people.

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

G. Washington

STATION 4: DAVID ECKSTEIN IN CHEDER IN BROD



Label

David Eckstein, seven years old, and classmates in cheder (Jewish elementary school) Brod, Czechoslovakia Ca. 1938

Gift of Mara Vishniac Kohn, The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life, University of California, Berkeley

Roman Vishniac (1897–1990) was a Jewish photographer best known for documenting Jewish life in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust. Between 1935 and 1938, he traveled throughout the region on behalf of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), photographing Jewish communities facing increasing antisemitism and economic hardship. His photographs captured everyday moments of Jewish life—including family, education, work, and religious practice—and today serve as an important visual record of communities that were later devastated during the Holocaust.

This photograph shows seven-year-old David Eckstein and his classmates in a cheder, a traditional Jewish elementary school where children learned Hebrew, Torah (Hebrew Bible), and other foundational Jewish texts. For generations, the cheder helped pass Jewish knowledge, traditions, and values from one generation to the next, while strengthening a shared sense of community and belonging.

Bibliography

"Carpathian Ruthenia, 1938." Roman Vishniac Rediscovered – International Center of Photography. Accessed July 23, 2026. <https://vishniac.icp.org/carpathian-ruthenia-1938>

"[77.343] Hanging lamp." The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life. Accessed July 23, 2026. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/magnesmuseum/4712794722>.

"Photographic print of David Eckstein and classmates in cheder." United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed July 23, 2026. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn613483>

"Shaping Our Memory: Images from the Roman Vishniac Archive." The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life. December 7, 2021. <https://magnes.berkeley.edu/news/shaping-our-memory-images-from-the-roman-vishniac-archive/>

"Stelae and Reliefs of Pharaoh Merneptah, c. 1207 BCE." Center for Online Judaic Studies. Accessed July 23, 2026. https://cojs.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Merneptah_Stele.jpg.

"Washington's Letter." Loeb Visitors Center – Touro Synagogue National Historic Site. Accessed July 23, 2026. <https://www.loebvisitors.org/files/george-washington-letter-archival-image.pdf>.

VIDEO VIEWING GUIDE: WHO ARE JEWS?

Directions: As you watch the video, use the questions below to collect evidence that will help you answer how the Jewish people have maintained a shared identity across thousands of years while living in many different parts of the world.

OPENING: IDENTITY AND EVERYDAY JEWISH LIFE (0:00–1:20)

Name some of the Jewish figures you saw in the beginning of the video. _____

Describe some of the contributions Jewish individuals have made to the world. _____

What do you notice about the diversity of Jewish people in this opening? _____

JEWISH ORIGINS (1:20–2:55)

Where and when did Judaism originate? _____

Why was Judaism considered “radical” when it began? _____

What is the name of the core Jewish text? What else do people call it? _____

How long has Jerusalem been the center of Jewish national and spiritual life? _____

BECOMING A PEOPLE (2:55–4:20)

King David made Jerusalem the capital of the Kingdom of Israel for the Jewish people in 1003 BC. What does "BC" stand for? How many years ago was 1003 BC (also known as BCE)?

In what year did the Roman army destroy Jerusalem (and the Jewish temple)? What was the impact of that destruction on the Jewish people?

What did Jews NOT have after the destruction of Jerusalem?

In what direction did Jews face when they prayed, and what was the hope they expressed during prayer?

DIASPORA AND DIVERSITY (4:20–6:10)

What false belief led to hatred and suspicion of Jews by their non-Jewish neighbors? _____

In Europe in the 14th century, what other historical event were Jews blamed for? What was done to the Jewish people at that time?

During what contemporary event did similar lies surface about Jews spreading disease? What does the image on the sign held by the person in the car suggest?

In reality, in what ways did the Jewish people improve the communities in which they lived?

By the end of the 19th century, however, what was happening to the Jewish people?

CONTINUITY THROUGH HISTORY (6:10–8:55)

What did the movement called Zionism envision?

Why was the hope of Jews going to the land of Israel called a “return”?

The video explains that Jewish communities experienced many historical challenges. Name some of those challenges.

What definition does the video give for the Holocaust?

How did propaganda play a role in the Holocaust?

What is one of the most commonly used “tropes” (or myths) about Jews used during the Holocaust that is also used today?

JEWISH COMMUNITIES TODAY (8:55–10:30)

What examples does the video give of Jewish life today?

How do modern Jewish communities reflect both diversity and shared identity?

ACTIVITY 2

What Does Jewish Peoplehood Look Like?

Overview

In this Gallery Walk, students observe images of Jewish around the world in order to expand their understanding of Jewish Peoplehood.

Teacher Preparation

Print each image and mount it on poster paper. Display the posters around the classroom and invite students to walk through the gallery. As they explore each image and caption, have them respond to the discussion prompt by writing their reflections or observations on sticky notes and placing them next to the corresponding poster.

Debrief

Discuss students' observations as a large group. What did they observe? Record key words on a White Board or Easel.

Exit Card

What is one observation that you took away from the Gallery Walk? What is one lingering question?



Jenny and David Franco celebrate their daughter's wedding. Buffalo, New York 1974

David Franco was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1917. In 1907, his mother, Esther, left Jerusalem to join her sister in New York in search of greater opportunity. She later worked in a lace factory on New York City's Lower East Side. David's father, Isaac, was born in Aleppo, Syria. In 1909, he fled on foot with his brother, traveling through France before immigrating to New York. Although the Franco family had lived in Syria since the 1700s, their family heritage was a blend of Arab and Sephardic traditions.

Once settling in the United States, the Franco family spoke Arabic and preserved many Sephardic traditions, including distinctive recipes, music, and family customs that were passed from one generation to the next. While these cultural traditions remained an important part of the family's identity, the Arabic language itself was not passed on to the youngest generation of Francos born in the United States

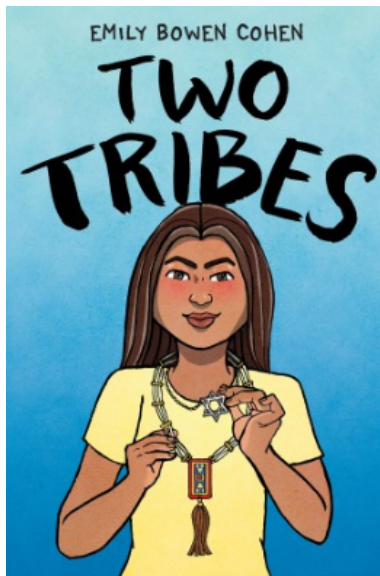


PROMPT

How does the Franco family's story expand your understanding of where Jewish families come from and the different journeys that brought them to the United States?



The Cohen Family celebrates a bar-mitzvah in Los Angeles, 2020. From left: Maccabee, (the bar-mitzvah boy) Dani, Etan, Beverly, and Emily.



Etan, a screenwriter, was born in Israel and grew up in Massachusetts. Emily, born in Boston, is the daughter of a Muscogee Creek father from Oklahoma and a Jewish mother from New Jersey.

Emily's book *Two Tribes* explores her dual identity.



PROMPT

What does this family's story suggest about what it means to belong to the Jewish people? What details in the caption challenge or expand your ideas about Jewish identity?



The Petago family. *Photo: ynet.co.il*

The Petago Family immigrated from Ethiopia to Israel in 1991. Azaria is self-employed, managing projects and leading workshops, while Miriam owns a daycare center. Together they are raising eight children, reflecting the rich diversity and vibrant traditions of Israel's Ethiopian Jewish community.



PROMPT

What does this family's story teach you about the diversity of the Jewish people? What assumptions might someone have about who is Jewish, and how does this image challenge them?



The Bnei Menashe are a Jewish community from Northeast India who trace their heritage to the Biblical tribe of Menashe. Living in relative isolation for centuries, they preserved unique traditions, songs, and customs passed down through generations. Their story reflects the diversity of Jewish life around the world. *Photos: Dorit Lombroso, ANU Museum*



PROMPT

Look closely at the three photographs. What do you notice? What links the three photos? How do the images and caption together illustrate both the diversity and the shared traditions of the Jewish people?

VOCABULARY ACTIVITY

Purpose: Understanding key vocabulary will help you explain Jewish identity using historical evidence. *Before* watching the video, write your own definition for each of the words below. Then, as you watch the video or listen to class discussion, refine your definition in the second column.

Vocabulary word	Definition (in your own words)	Definition from video or discussion
IDENTITY		
PEOPLEHOOD		
ANCESTRY		
DIASPORA		
CULTURE		
TRADITION		
THE HOLOCAUST		
PROPAGANDA		
ANTISEMITISM		
TROPE		

Making Connections: Choose three vocabulary words that you think are most important for understanding Jewish identity. *If you learned another word that isn't on the list above, please add it!*

VOCABULARY WORD #1:

Why is this word important? _____

How was this idea illustrated in the video? _____

VOCABULARY WORD #2:

Why is this word important? _____

How was this idea illustrated in the video? _____

VOCABULARY WORD #3:

Why is this word important? _____

How was this idea illustrated in the video? _____

SELF-ASSESSMENT

How confident are you using today's vocabulary?

- ☐ I am still learning these terms.
- ☐ I understand most of the vocabulary.
- ☐ I can accurately use these words when explaining Jewish identity.



FINAL WRITING ASSESSMENT

For your final writing assessment, write an organized response that answers the question: **How have the Jewish people maintained a shared identity across thousands of years while living in many different places?**

In your response, be sure to:

- Describe how history, ancestry, culture, traditions, religion, and peoplehood contribute to Jewish identity.
- Show how Jewish communities demonstrate both continuity and diversity across time and place.
- Support your ideas with specific evidence from the gallery walks, the video, your guided video reflections, and class discussions.

Your response should demonstrate both historical understanding and evidence-based reasoning.

PLANNING YOUR RESPONSE (SUGGESTED FOR A 5 PARAGRAPH ESSAY ASSIGNMENT):

STEP 1: DEVELOP YOUR CLAIM

Your claim should address the question **How have the Jewish people maintained a shared identity across thousands of years while living in many different places?**

Evidence #1

How does this support your claim? _____

Evidence #2

How does this support your claim? _____

Evidence #3

How does this support your claim? _____

STEP 2: GATHER EVIDENCE

List at least three examples from the video and / or gallery walks that support your claim.

Evidence #1

How does this support your claim? _____

Evidence #2

How does this support your claim? _____

Evidence #3

How does this support your claim? _____

STEP 3: CONCLUSION

Rather than re-stating your claim as a conclusion, your claim and supporting evidence should move your reader into a conclusion that addresses the following question:

Why do you feel it is important to have a more complete understanding of the Jewish people

LESSON REFLECTION & EXIT TICKET

WHO ARE THE JEWISH PEOPLE?

Directions: Answer the questions below. Support your responses with specific examples whenever possible.

PART 1 – LOOKING BACK

Before watching the video, what did you think it meant to be Jewish? _____

Has your understanding changed? Explain your answer. _____

PART 2 – HISTORICAL THINKING

The video and gallery walk activities show us that Jewish identity includes many different elements. Choose three elements you think are most important for understanding Jewish identity:

- ☐ Shared history
- ☐ Shared ancestry
- ☐ Religion
- ☐ Culture
- ☐ Traditions
- ☐ Language
- ☐ Connection to the Land of Israel
- ☐ Traditions
- ☐ Another element:

PART 3 – USING EVIDENCE

Identify three pieces of evidence from the video and gallery walks that led you to choose the three elements you choose above:

Evidence 1: _____

Evidence 2: _____

Evidence 3: _____

PART 4 – HISTORICAL INQUIRY

Return to the lesson's essential question: How do a people maintain a shared identity across thousands of years while living in many different places?

Write a complete response using evidence from the video / gallery walks.

PART 5 – REFLECTION OPTIONS

(Grades 6–8): What is one new thing you learned today that surprised you or challenged something you previously believed about Jewish identity?

(Grades 9–12):

1. Describe some misconceptions historically held about Judaism and the Jewish people.

2. How is Jewish peoplehood both an ethnicity and a religion?

SELF-ASSESSMENT

After today's lesson, how confident are you that you can explain how the Jewish people have maintained a shared identity across thousands of years while living in many different places?

- ☐ I need more practice.
- ☐ I understand most of the ideas but have the following questions:
- ☐ I feel confident that I can describe Jewish peoplehood using evidence from the video, the gallery walks, How does this support your claim?

