

***From Haven To Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America***  
**Lesson Plans**

Prepared for the American Jewish Historical Society  
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Facing History and Ourselves

Overview

The Jewish experience in America dates back to 1654, when the first 23 brave Jewish immigrants fled from religious persecution in Recife, Brazil and sailed to what was then New Amsterdam in search of religious freedom. In the years that followed, waves of Jewish immigrants filtered through America's open gates following their predecessor's search for religious liberty and the opportunity to enjoy the many freedoms America promised.

The following lesson suggests ways in which students can prepare for their visit to the exhibit "From Haven to Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America". They will uncover the rich experience of the Jewish immigrants in America from 1654 to the present, while grappling with the major themes associated with those journeys.

In the first two lessons students will have an opportunity to grapple with the definition of "haven" and "home" by defining these terms from their own experiences. They will then broaden their definitions by taking a glance at individual Jewish immigrants' experiences throughout the 350 years in America and draw connections between their own experience and those of their fellow American Jews.

In the third lesson, which is meant to take place at the exhibit, suggests a venue for students to look at the Lower East Side immigrant experience from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century-early 20<sup>th</sup> Century as described through letters from The Bintel Brief. The theme of "haven to home" will further be explored.

The follow-up activity offers a way for students to synthesize their exhibit experience through a close analysis of "the New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus. They will draw parallels from the past to the present by re-writing this famous poem in their own words.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Build an understanding of the long history of Jews in America
- Define the terms "haven" and "home" and discuss how and when the transition from the former to the latter occurs.
- Examine the challenges, struggles, successes and joys of the Jewish immigrant experience.
- Analyze the experience of being an insider v. outsider

- Define the term “Universe of Obligation” and comprehend how a group develops their own community and reflect upon their own personal attitudes towards their self-defined universe of obligation.
- Analyze some of the specific commitments individual Jews made to their fellow Jewish Americans as they developed their own “Universes of obligation” throughout history.

Suggested Grade Level

Grades 6-8

*While this lesson unit is targeted for the middle school age group, each lesson can be modified to suit the needs of a high school or elementary school teacher. Because most of the activities in the unit contain open-ended questions and opportunities for students’ personal reflections, the lessons are designed to be flexible for any age grouping.*

Duration of Activities

3 class periods and a 20-minute lesson at the exhibit

## **Lesson 1: When Does a Haven Become a Home?**

### **Activity 1: Think-Pair-Share (20 mins.)**

a) Place the word “Haven” on the board. Tell students that for the next few minutes they will be asked to reflect upon the term “haven” as they understand it. In journals or notebooks ask students to silently respond to the following questions:

- When do you feel unsafe? Insecure? Are there ever moments when you have wished you could be plucked out from where you were and taken to a different setting—a place where you might feel safer?
- What factors/people/friends/places/communities allow you to feel safe?

b) Have students pair with a partner and share their reflections.

Regroup as a whole class and ask students to voluntarily report their responses while the teacher writes their responses on the board.

c) In groups of 4-5:

- students should attempt to define the word “Haven” with the help of their responses written on the wall and their own personal reflections.
- students should write their definitions on a poster to be displayed in the class.
- Share poster-definitions

d) Have students return to their individual desks and do a similar activity with the term “Home”.

- Brainstorm words/images that come to mind when thinking of “home”
- Can one have more than one home?
- Have you ever traveled somewhere outside of your home (Camp? Vacation? A foreign country? A new city? Moved to a new house?)? Did any of those places become “home” to you? Why or why not?
- Are there any parallels between your responses and perhaps those of the evacuees from Hurricane Katrina? What kind of haven might they be seeking and in your opinion, will these havens ever become home to them?

e) Summarize this activity by introducing the exhibit’s title and emphasizing how they will be learning about the journeys of many American Jews who were seeking a safe haven from religious persecution, intolerance, poverty and danger. Stress that the stories of each individual, beginning as early as 1654 through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, share commonalities regarding their search for a haven. Point out that at some point their American haven became a home to them.

### **Activity 2: Concentric Circles (20 mins.)**

#### **“Universe of Obligation”**

a) Invite students to create a series of concentric circles in which the inner circle includes those people for whom they feel a strong responsibility. As the circles move outwards

the level of responsibility that the students feel for those people included in the outer rings decreases.

b) Introduce the term “Universe of Obligation.”

*In her book, Accounting for Genocide, sociologist, Helen Fine coined the term “universe of obligation.” She defines the concept as the “circle of individuals and groups towards whom obligations are owed, to whom rules apply and whose injuries call for amends.”*

c) Ask students to think about who is in their own universe of obligation? What groups are in the outer circles? What groups/individuals are in the middle? Are there any groups that didn’t make it onto their charts at all?

*Help students make the connection between the success of the American Jewish immigrant and the “universe of obligation” the Jewish community developed in America. The Talmudic injunction (kol Israel arayvim ze la ze) that “all of Israel are responsible for each other” guided many of the American Jewish community’s “universe of obligation” throughout our 350 years in America.*

➤ Examples:

- **Rebecca Gratz** (1781-1869) established the Hebrew Sunday School movement, ensuring a Jewish education for Jewish children.
- **Jewish Northerners** during the Civil War fought to defend Jewish rights on the home-front, as well as protesting Gen. Ulysses S. Grant’s notorious Order #11 which expelled all Jews from Tennessee, Kentucky and Mississippi.
- **Adolphus Solomon** (1862-1910), prominent Washington, D.C. businessman and civic activist helped convince President Lincoln to revoke Gen. Grant’s order. He also was instrumental in establishing the American Red Cross.
- **Rose Pesotta** (1896-1965) firebrand of the American labor movement and organizer of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.
- **Alice Davis Menken** (1870-1936) helped Sephardic newcomers on New York’s Lower East Side and became a renowned expert on the problems of immigrant women and teenagers.
- **American Jewish organizations** rallied American public opinion to help European Jewry and boycott German goods (half a million American Jews served in the armed forces during WWII-many of which liberated Europe from the Nazis).
- **Rabbi Joseph S. Shubow** (1899-1969) from Brighton, MA co-led a Passover celebration in Berlin, rescued three Torah scrolls in Germany and served the needs of the G.I.’s who liberated France, Holland and Germany.
- **The American Jewish Community** publicly welcomed President Truman’s support in 1948 for the establishment of a Jewish State.
- **Graenum Berger** (1908-1999) New York social worker who made the resettlement of Ethiopian Jews in Israel his life’s mission.

## Lesson 2: From Haven to Home: A Look at the Experience of Individual Jewish Immigrants Throughout American History

### Activity 1: Group Research (Colonial Period) (30 minutes)

Split the class into 4 small groups. Each group will concentrate on a specific individual Jewish immigrant to America during the Colonial Period (*use the characters from the Babaganewz “Celebrate 350” editions included in this packet: “Our Colonial Life” pgs. 2, 4-7 (Rebecca Samuel, Gershom Mendes Seixas and Naphtali and Abigail Franks) and “Making a Home in America” pgs.6-7 (Letters from the Jewish Homestead).*

**\*\* The Babaganewz supplements can be downloaded by going to:**

[http://www.babaganewz.com/teachers/index\\_main.cfm?cat=10&sub=350America&sub2=x](http://www.babaganewz.com/teachers/index_main.cfm?cat=10&sub=350America&sub2=x)

Have the students read about his/her assigned person and as a group respond to the following:

- Write a brief biography of your assigned personality. Be sure to include:
  - **Who** (name, occupation, etc.)
  - **Where** (was your assigned character living before coming to USA and in USA)
  - **When** (time period)
  - **Why** (did he/she choose to come to the USA)
  
- Create an identity chart for your assigned personality. Begin with words or phrases that describe the way you see your historical character. Include not only gender and age, but your individual’s ties to Judaism, America, employment, family. Also include any suitable labels (ex. Peacemaker, conformist, rebel, leader, follower). See chart below as an example:

Rabbi	Male	1907-1972
Professor	Abraham Joshua Heschel	Fled Poland
Civil Rights Activist	Philosopher	Writer

- Are there specific issues, challenges, surprises, disappointments experienced by your assigned personality? If so, describe them.

- What is your character's attitude towards America?
- What are the ways your character maintains his or her Jewish identity in America?

Have the groups share their person with the class.

### **Activity 2 (Optional): Making Stamps**

- a) Break down each group into pairs. Each pair should design an oversized stamp celebrating their assigned character. Be sure to highlight his/her specific achievements. Use different art supplies available (watercolor paints, construction paper, posterboard, markers, etc.)
- b) Present stamps to class.
- c) Teacher may summarize the activity by making connections to the previous lesson regarding "haven" and "home".

**Lesson 3-**(suggested activity for classes at the exhibit:)

**The Jewish Immigrant Experience from the late 1800s to the 1900s as seen in letters from “A Bintel Brief”.**

*This Lesson is based on letters from the A Bintel Brief. Working with a copy of A Bintel Brie (information is below) select several letters bring to the exhibit with your class. Make sure you have enough copies for students to work independently or in small groups. This activity can also be used in the classroom.*

Metzker, Isaac, ed. A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters from the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.

*Explain to students that the exhibit highlights the many successes and joys American Jews experienced throughout their 350- year history in America. The “self-made” men and women throughout the past 350 years were able to find ways to successfully rise from poverty to economic comfort. New immigrants became laborers and garment workers, they were dressmakers, shopkeepers, professional athletes, musicians and actors. They valorized business and soon became American heroes. They became civil-rights activists, doctors, outspoken Zionists, fighters for democracy and equality.*

*In short, the experience of the Jewish immigrant throughout the centuries should be a source of pride for our Jewish community. Their strength and heroism serves as a model for the many other immigrants who have left their homes in search of a haven, bringing new meaning to the well-known Jewish principle of “Or Lagoyim (light unto all nations)”.*

*However, the struggles many encountered as they shifted from their American haven to home were not without sadness, fear, frustration and hardship. The collection of letters in the Bintel Brief, written by early 20<sup>th</sup> century Eastern European immigrants, depicts these painful (yet, sometimes amusing) experiences.*

*Teachers should be advised that some of the letters contain mature content (discussions of psychological depression, divorce, marital problems). Feel free to choose letters you deem to be most appropriate for your classes.*

**Jigsaw Activity: In pairs, read one-three Bintel Brief letters and discuss them with each other. As you read the letters think about:**

- Challenges faced by the immigrants of the Lower East Side of New York City
- Personal, social and economic factors contributing to their need to write letters to the editor
- How would you advise them?
- How do you think these immigrants succeeded in making a home in America?

**If time permits, choose another pair with which to discuss and share the readings with each other.**

## Lesson 4- (Follow-Up lesson to be used after visiting the exhibit): Rewriting “The New Colossus”

### Activity 1: Background:

Share the following background to Emma Lazarus’ famous poem, “The New Colossus”:

*“Give me your tired, your poor./ Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”*  
Emma Lazarus’ famous lines caught our national imagination and continue to inspire the way we think about freedom and exile today. Written in 1883, her celebrated poem, “The New Colossus,” is engraved on a plaque in the Statue of Liberty. Over the years, the sonnet has become a part of American culture, serving as everything from an Irving Berlin show tune to a call for immigrants’ rights.



Source: “JWA –Emma Lazarus-Introduction” <http://www.jwa.org/exhibits/wov/lazarus/index.html> (Sept. 13, 2005)

### **Read poem aloud and have a discussion about its meaning:**

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame  
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;  
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,  
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she  
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"  
*by Emma Lazarus, New York City, 1883*

Guide Questions for discussion:

- What is the mood of her poem?
- Does the “mother of exiles” welcome everyone to her teeming shores?
- What do her “mild eyes” suggest?
- Who are the tired and poor she mentions?
- What does she mean by “wretched refuse”?
- Who are the “homeless”?
- As an immigrant, are there things in this poem you would want to change?
- Why do you think this poem was chosen to be placed on the Statue of Liberty?
- Do you see any signs of her Jewish identity?

### **Activity 2: Writing the “New Colossus”**

a) Introduction:

Having experienced the exhibit: “From Haven to Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America”, one might revisit the poem, “The New Colossus” with a new lens.

Does the image of the “wretched refuse” and “tired and poor” accurately depict the images of the American Jews you learned about at the exhibit?

Brainstorm alternative descriptors for the Jewish immigrants who came and prospered in America.

b) In pairs, make a new identity chart for “American Jews from 1654-Present”. Be sure to include suitable descriptive words, labels, titles, and images.

c) Using your identity chart as a guide, rewrite your own version of “The New Colossus”.

d) Share and display the final drafts of the poems.