

LESSON PLAN

From Passover to Purim: Jewish Holidays and Observances

Essential Question: *What can Jewish holidays tell us about the Jewish community in the U.S.?*

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-1	2-5	40 minutes	Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, Language.
6-8	9-12		

[**Note:** This lesson plan is part of a collection of lesson plans [collection of lesson plans on Jewish American Heritage Month](#) on Jewish American Heritage Month. Lessons can be taught sequentially or each lesson can be taught as a standalone lesson.]

LESSON OVERVIEW

Holidays and observances can provide a window into a group of people—their history, identity and culture. Holidays are special days, usually observed every year, that often include traditions, celebrations and being with others. Jewish holidays can help us learn more about Jewish people and the Jewish experience. Even though there are differences in the way Jewish people celebrate, exploring these holidays can help us learn more about Jewish history, identity traditions, and religious observance. This lesson plan provides an opportunity for students to reflect on holidays and their importance to one's identity, learn about a variety of Jewish holidays and study one holiday in depth and present what they learned to others.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will reflect on the range of holidays celebrated in the U.S. and what holidays are important or meaningful to them.
- Students will learn about a variety of Jewish holidays including the holiday's history, cultural significance and traditions.
- Students will explore one Jewish holiday in depth and present their learnings to their peers.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

- [Hanukkah](#) (one copy for each student)
- [6 Jewish Holidays](#) (one copy for each student)

[**Note to Teacher:** You may or may not know the religious and cultural background of the students in your classroom. If you have students who are either Jewish or have Jewish heritage in your classroom, don't assume that those Jewish students



Web Related Connections

LESSON PLANS

[9 Ideas for Teaching Jewish American Heritage Month](#)

[Celebrating Jewish American Heritage: Lesson Plans for Learning, Reflection and Connection \(includes 6 Middle School Lesson Plans\)](#)

Other Resources:

[5 Things to Know about the Jewish High Holidays](#)

[9 Classroom Activities for Exploring the Calendar of Observances](#)

[Calendar of Observances](#)

[Films About the Jewish Experience: Classroom Toolkit](#)

[Jewish American Heritage Month Resources](#)

[Meaningful Picture Books about Holidays and Observances](#)

[Resources to Address and Challenge Antisemitism](#)

Key Words

culture
denomination
holiday
observant
penitence
religion
repentance
restriction
symbols
tradition
values
worship

are knowledgeable about or interested in Judaism or the Jewish experience. Your students will probably have a range of thoughts and feelings about Jewish American Heritage Month – pride, embarrassment, interest, annoyance, excitement, boredom—or they may not think much about it at all. Be mindful not to put Jewish students in the role of being the “authority” on Jewish American people, history, religion or culture. Avoid asking or expecting any one Jewish student to speak for all Jewish people or students. When discussing the Jewish experience or antisemitism, always keep in mind that those conversations can inadvertently cause harm to Jewish students, despite your intent being the opposite. Keep that in mind as you plan and reinforce [classroom guidelines](#) for safe, respectful and inclusive environments. It is also important to acknowledge that Jewish people as a group are more diverse than many people realize or understand. This diversity is reflected in Jewish people’s ethnicity, race, culture, immigration history, religious observance, LGBTQ+ identity, and language. You might consider sharing some of this with your students.]



Introduction: The importance and relevance of holidays

1. Begin the lesson by asking students: *What are holidays? What are some holidays you celebrate?* Explain and elicit that holidays are special days, usually observed every year, that often include celebrating, observing, honoring and being with others. Explain that holidays can be based on someone’s religion, culture, race, nationality, ethnicity or something else. Remind students that people in a specific identity group (e.g., Jewish people, Irish people, Muslim people) don’t all celebrate holidays in the same way and also share that some people don’t celebrate holidays at all.

2. Brainstorm a list of holidays that may include some or all of the following:

- | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|---------------------|
| • Hanukkah | • Lunar New Year | • Labor Day |
| • Easter | • International Holocaust Remembrance Day | • Coming Out Day |
| • Eid al-Fitr | • Ramadan | • St. Patrick’s Day |
| • Martin Luther King, Jr. Day | • Holi | • Sukkot |
| • Fourth of July | • Cinco de Mayo | • Thanksgiving |
| • Halloween | • Father’s Day | • Kwanzaa |
| • Passover | • Memorial Day | • Obon |
| • Juneteenth | • Three Kings Day | • Christmas |
| • Diwali | | |

[**Note to Teacher:** If time permits, project ADL’s [Calendar of Observances](#) and use it to add to the list.]

3. Ask students: *What are some things that many holidays have in common?* Elicit a list that includes the following:
 - Celebrating the holiday with family, friends or others.
 - Can involve special traditions (handing down of information, beliefs, or customs from one generation to another) and practices.
 - Can include special foods related (or not) to the identity group.
 - Can be a time to commemorate or honor values that bring people together.
 - May include religious observance or going to a religious service.
 - May include people having time off from school/work or they may need to take time off from school/work because of their observance.
4. Invite students to turn and talk with someone sitting nearby. Ask them to share their favorite or most meaningful holiday, how they celebrate the holiday and why it’s important or meaningful to them. Explain that if students don’t celebrate holidays or don’t want to share, they can instead talk about a favorite family activity or tradition. After pairs have shared, ask some students to share with class.

5. Ask: *Why is it important or helpful to learn about the holidays observed by a group of people?* Elicit/explain that learning about holidays observed by a specific group of people can help us learn more about that group/community and can also help us feel connected to others because we know more about and possibly share some commonalities around holidays.

Reading Activity: What are the Jewish Holidays?

1. Ask students: *What Jewish holidays do you know or have you heard about?* As students share Jewish holidays they know, ask: *What do you know about that holiday?* Begin to create a list of Jewish holidays on the board/smart board.
2. Then ask: *Are there different ways to celebrate Jewish holidays?* You can explain that there can be a great deal of variation in how people observe and celebrate Jewish holidays. Some of these factors include:
 - Religious denomination or branches (such as Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist).
 - Family traditions and rituals.
 - Religious practices.
 - Personal or family preferences.
 - Values and ethics.

You can also explain that some people who identify as Jewish don't observe all the holidays or they may not celebrate any of them.

3. Explain that later in the lesson we are going to explore a few holidays in depth. One of those is Hanukkah. Ask students: *What do you know about Hanukkah?* Distribute a copy of the article Hanukkah to all students. Provide 10-15 minutes for students to read silently or read aloud together. After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:
 - What did you learn about Hanukkah that you didn't know before?
 - How is Hanukkah celebrated today? What are some of traditions?
 - What foods are prepared and eaten and what is the meaning behind those foods?
 - Why is Hanukkah important to Jewish people and Jewish history?
 - What is your biggest takeaway from reading this article?
 - Is knowing this information about Hanukkah important? Why or why not?

Research: Deeper Dive on 6 Jewish Holidays

1. Explain to students that we are now going to learn about some Jewish holidays in more depth in order to learn more about Jewish people, culture, traditions, and religious observance. Those holidays are: Hanukkah, Passover, Purim, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Shabbat.
2. First explain that the exact dates of Jewish holidays and observances differ each year because the Hebrew (Jewish) calendar is lunar-based. Then, share the following information about each of the holidays, first asking students what they already know about the holiday and then sharing aloud and/or distributing the [6 Jewish Holidays](#) handout to students and taking turns reading aloud.

Hanukkah: The eight-day festival of Hanukkah—or “Festival of Lights”—commemorates the miraculous victory of the Maccabees and rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem. Hanukkah has no restrictions whatsoever on work or travel—although many Jewish families and communities get together to celebrate this festive holiday. It is customary to eat fried foods such as potato *latkes* or jelly doughnuts.

Passover: The week-long spring festival of Passover/Pesach commemorates the deliverance of the Jewish people from bondage in ancient Egypt. The Passover Seder on the first two nights—an elaborate and ritualized meal—recounts the story of Exodus using ritual foods, prayers, stories and songs. Only the first two and last two days of Passover are observed as full holy days, with restrictions on work and travel.

Purim: This carnival-like holiday celebrates the defeat of a plot to destroy the Jews of Persia. It is customary to dress in costumes (similar to Halloween or Mardi Gras), and to give gifts of food to friends and the needy, particularly *hamantashen*, triangular pastries filled with fruit or poppy seeds.

Rosh Hashanah The Jewish New Year, the beginning of ten days of penitence (introspection, acknowledging wrongdoing and asking for forgiveness), culminating on Yom Kippur (see Yom Kippur below). Traditionally celebrated with sweet or round foods such as apples and honey, and the blowing of the *shofar*, a hollowed-out ram's horn, during religious services. A customary greeting is *shanah tovah* or "happy new year!"

Yom Kippur: The Day of Atonement; a very solemn day devoted to fasting, prayer, and repentance (asking for forgiveness). Observant Jews do not eat, drink (including water), bathe, or wear anything made of leather on this day of awe. Jewish people come together to reflect on the past year and resolve to do better in the future.

Shabbat: The Jewish Sabbath—*Shabbat* in Hebrew, *Shabbos* in Yiddish—is observed every week beginning at sunset on Friday evening and ending after dark on Saturday evening. For religiously observant Jews, Shabbat is as important as any other holy day.

(Descriptions from [Religious and Spiritual Life](#), University of Massachusetts Amherst)

3. Divide students (or let them choose) into six small groups, each small group assigned to one of the six holidays. Each of the small groups will undertake research about the holiday. They should answer some or all of the questions below. Provide time in class if you allow devices in your classroom for students to do internet research and provide time in the library for other research. This may take place during one class period or over the course of a few days. The questions are:
 - What is the history of this holiday?
 - What is the meaning or significance of the holiday?
 - Why is this holiday important to the Jewish community?
 - What are some of the traditions that take place during this holiday?
 - Are there religious observances associated with this holiday? If so, what are they?
 - How is this holiday celebrated differently across different communities, denominations and families?
 - What about this holiday can you relate to?
 - If you were to explain this holiday to a friend or family member, how would you describe it?
4. Have students share what they learned by doing a presentation. Make sure each person in the group has the opportunity to share some of what the group learned.
5. After all the holidays have been presented, engage students in a discussion by asking:
 - What did you learn by doing this, your own holiday as well as others?
 - What are some aspects of these holidays that are common? What are some of the differences?
 - What did you learn about Jewish people, identity, history and culture by learning about holidays?

(Some suggested responses include: Jewish history is meaningful to the holiday; importance of community; family traditions; symbolic foods; prayer and reflection/introspection; importance of freedom; storytelling;

connecting with family, friends, community and disconnecting from technology, work and school; importance of the arts—music, dance, singing, shofar-blowing.)

- Do you think it's important to understand holidays in order to understand a group of people who celebrate that holiday? Please explain.



Writing Activity

1. Engage students in a writing assignment where they write a short essay, poem, speech, script, (for short video) or series of social media posts that responds to one of the following prompts:
 - What is one of the Jewish holidays you find compelling, meaningful or important? Share what the holiday is, share a few important things about the holiday and why it's compelling, meaningful or important.
 - What is an important holiday, observance of family tradition of yours? Why is it meaningful or important to you? Write about or draw a Venn diagram where they compare and contrast the Jewish holidays/observances with a holiday they celebrate (if different from Jewish holiday); the center part of the Venn diagram would be the overlap between the holidays.

Provide time for students to write these essays in class, if time permits, or assign it for homework.

2. When their writing is completed, invite some or all of the students to share their work aloud to the class.

Closing

Do a go round and have students share one new thing they learned during the lesson.



Extension Activity Ideas

1. Explore the rest of the Jewish holidays by compiling a list of all the Jewish holidays, in addition the six learned during this lesson, and have students work alone or in pairs to learn and compile information about them. Consider doing a presentation or poster display in the hallway for the school so others can learn more.
2. Have students choose one of the Jewish holidays and create a picture book for young children that explains more about the holiday in the context of a story that children will enjoy to read.
3. As a class, undertake a similar study of other holidays and observances that could be connected to a specific identity group or not. Use the [calendar of observances](#) to select holidays and then have students undertake a study of that holiday and its meaning as they did with the Jewish holidays.



Additional Reading and Resources

- [A Short Guide to Jewish Religion, Culture, Holiday Observances and Calendar](#) (American Jewish Committee)
- [Jewish Holidays](#) (Chabad.org)
- [Jewish Holidays: An Introduction](#) (Jewish Virtual Library, AICE)
- [The Jewish Denominations](#) (My Jewish Learning)
- [Your Guide to Jewish Holidays](#) (My Jewish Learning)

Common Core Anchor Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Writing
W2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content. W4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. SL4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate. L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

6 Jewish Holidays

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