

## LESSON PLAN

# Using Poetry to Reflect on the Jewish Experience

**Essential Question:** *What can we learn from listening to Jewish voices expressed through the art of poetry?*



| Grade Level |      | Time          | Common Core Standards                               |
|-------------|------|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| K-1         | 2-5  | 40-50 minutes | Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening, Language. |
| 6-8         | 9-12 |               |                                                     |

## Web Related Connections

### LESSON PLANS

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

[Diverse Books Matter](#)

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

### Other Resources:

[Celebrating Jewish American Heritage Month Through Film](#)

[Jewish American Heritage Month Resources](#)

[Book Round-Up](#)

[Resources to Address and Challenge Antisemitism](#)

### Key Words

abject  
 assume  
 catastrophe  
 consequence  
 hardships  
 identity  
 impressionable  
 infinite  
 patronizing  
 pity  
 self-determination  
 shame  
 stereotypes  
 synonymous  
 vulnerable

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

## LESSON OVERVIEW

Reading literature and narratives, in a variety of genres, is one way to get to know more about a group of people. Literature and narratives by and about people who are Jewish and about the Jewish experience can highlight voices from all parts of the Jewish community and can provide knowledge, perspective and experiences of Jewish people, identity and culture. This lesson plan provides an opportunity for students to explore how literature can help tell the stories of Jewish people, consider the “danger of a single story,” reflect on the Jewish experience by reading and analyzing poetry and reflect on their own identities by writing original poems about an aspect of their identity.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand how literature, specifically poetry, can help tell the individual stories of groups of people, specifically Jewish people.
- Students will consider “the danger of a single story” and why it’s important to read or watch a variety of stories about a group of people.
- Students will reflect on the Jewish American experience by reading and analyzing poetry.
- Students will explore aspects of their own identities by writing (poetry or another form) or creating artwork about an aspect of their identity.

## MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

- [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story](#) (Video, 19 min., 16 sec.)
- [Excerpts: “The Danger of a Single Story”](#) (one copy for each student)
- [One: A Poem for the Jewish People](#) (one copy for each student and/or projected on the board/smart board)

**[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 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.]

## Identity: Mirrors and Windows in Literature

1. Ask students: *Have you ever read a book, story or poem that was about an identity group that you are a part of? What was that like? How did you feel? Did you connect with it?* Then ask: *Have you ever read a book about an identity group you were not part of? What was that like? How did you feel? What did you learn?*

Share with students that sometimes when people talk about diverse books, books that reflect different aspects of our identities, they use the term “mirrors and windows.” If necessary, use some of these points to further explain.

- Elicit/explain that a mirror is a surface that forms reflections. When you look in a mirror, you see yourself. “Mirror books” are books that contain reflections of people—their culture, family, race, religion, etc.—and enable people to see themselves in books in a variety of ways. Reading books about aspects of your identity (race, religion, ethnicity, etc.) can help people feel seen, valued and good about those parts of themselves.
  - Explain/elicite that a window is an opening where you can look outside. “Window books” show the people reading them a window into other people, events and places that they might be unfamiliar with. It helps to help us learn about kinds of people who are different than we are in terms of race, religion, ethnicity and other aspects of identity. If possible, share an example of a window book for you (the teacher).
  - Ask some students to share a mirror book (or movie, TV show, song, story, TikTok influencer, etc.) for them and a window book (or movie, TV show, song, story, TikTok influencer, etc.) for them.
2. Explain that today, we are going to use poetry to learn about Jewish people, identity, history and culture. Depending on your identity, this could be a window or a mirror poem. Elicit/explain that not all Jewish people have the same experience so even if you identify as Jewish, the poems may or may not resonate with your identity and experience.

## The Danger of a Single Story

1. For this activity, depending on how much time you have, you could either:
  - Watch the entire video [The danger of a single story](#) (19 minutes)
  - Read [Excerpts: “The Danger of a Single Story”](#) (5-7 minutes)
  - Read and watch clips using [Excerpts: “The Danger of a Single Story”](#) (5-7 minutes)

Before watching or reading, explain that the video is a talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian author who wrote several novels including *Purple Hibiscus*, *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah*.

After watching or reading and if time permits, invite students to turn and talk and share with their partner a response to: *What did you notice? What did you wonder?*

2. Engage students in a group discussion by asking:

- What is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie saying?
- What is the “danger of a single story?”
- What are some examples of the “danger of a single story” that she describes in her talk?
- Have you had a similar experience, that you may have had one story about a group of people in your mind?
- What does it mean to “flatten a group of people?”
- In the video, Adichie says, “the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” What does she mean by this?
- What is your biggest takeaway from listening to her talk?
- How is the concept of “the danger of a single story” important in understanding more about Jewish people by reading literature and other narratives?

3. Elicit/explain that learning about people through narratives can include novels, poetry, plays, short stories, verse, novellas, first-person narratives and can also include videos, movies, etc. Today we will be using poetry to learn more about Jewish people and the Jewish experience.



### Reading Activity: Poetry and the Jewish Experience

1. Distribute a copy of the poem **One: A Poem for the Jewish People** and project on the board/smart board if possible. Explain that the poem was written by a teen and who won the 2015 NFTY (North American Federation for Temple Youth) writing competition. Read the poem aloud, asking students to take turns reading. Read a second time if you think that would be helpful.
2. Engage students in a discussion about the poem by asking some or all of the following questions:
  - What words, thoughts or feelings came to mind as you were reading and listening to the poem?
  - What is the poem about? What is the message of the poem?
  - What line or phrase in the poem is meaningful, powerful or compelling to you and why?
  - Are there any symbols or imagery in the poem? Which ones and what do they mean to you?
  - What is your biggest takeaway from reading the poem?
  - What does the poem reflect about the Jewish experience? About this person’s Jewish experience?

(Possible responses to share: Jewish people are part of a community; There are many different ways and journeys to being Jewish; Jewish people have been around for a very long time; Jews are a people; Jewish ancestors have struggled and faced great hardship and it has made Jewish people strong; Jewish people are diverse; While Jewish people have different stories, being Jewish connects Jews to a larger story; Jewish people learn lessons from memories and stories; Jewish people rely on one another and their traditions to guide them morally; Jewish people place a lot of value on shared history, traditions, and experiences—including hardship.)

- To what extent does the poem portray the Jewish experience in a complex and nuanced way?
- Why do you think the poet titled it “One: A Poem for the Jewish People?”
- Does this poem add to your understanding of what it means to be Jewish? How so?

3. Explain to students that they are now going to read other poems by Jewish poets and about Jewish people and the Jewish experience. Remind them about what they learned earlier about “the danger of a single story” and the importance of reading a variety of narratives by and about Jewish people.
4. Explain that using the websites below or others they find, students will select one of the poems included in these lists.

- [Jewish American Heritage Month](#) (poets.org)
- [Poems of Jewish Faith and Culture](#) (Poetry Foundation)
- [Explore Poems: Judaism](#) (Poetry Foundation)

**[Note to Teacher:** To save time and not have to rely on access, prior to the lesson select and print a collection of poems for students to choose from.]

5. They can work alone or with a partner to select a poem and then read and discuss it together. After discussing in pairs, invite students to read their poems aloud to the class and share their thoughts, feelings and insights about the poem and what it meant to them. Provide about ten minutes for students to begin this process and if you don’t allow internet access in your classroom, they can complete the project for homework.
6. After students have shared their poems with others (either as a read aloud or stations around the room with students sharing their poems), engage them in a brief discussion by asking:
  - What did you learn by hearing all these different poems?
  - What did you learn about Jewish people and the Jewish experience?
  - How does what you learned from reading many different poems help prevent “the danger of a single story?”



### **Writing Activity (Optional: Can be done as an extension activity)**

1. Engage students in a writing activity where they write a poem (or another form of writing) that reflects something about their identity group. Take them through a process where they consider the following factors before writing:
  - What is the identity group I belong to that I want to write a poem about?
  - What do I want to say about that aspect of this identity group?
  - How do I want the reader to feel?
  - What do I want the reader to think about?
  - What images or symbols do I want to use?
  - What is the main message I want to convey?

You can also use the **“I Am” format** for having students write poems about their identities; it helps to create a more structured format if students are writing poems like these for the first time.

2. If students choose to write poetry, you may also want to share with them a variety of genres of poetry they can use to write their poems. These include acrostic, haiku, limerick, ode, free verse, narrative and others. Here are some descriptions of [types of poetry](#).

3. If time permits, provide time for students to write in class or allow them to get started and assign its completion for homework. When their writing is completed, invite students to share them with the class, either as a presentation or have their work posted/displayed around the classroom and have students move around the room to read or hear the poems or other writing read aloud.

### Closing

Have students share the title of their poem or other writing or describe what the focus will be.

### Extension Activity Ideas

1. Invite students to identify a few poems from the collections above on a similar topic (i.e., holidays, history). Then have them either verbally or in an essay compare and contrast the poems' theme/message, genre, tone, rhythm, metaphors/imagery used, alliteration, literary devices, etc.
2. Have students create artwork that expresses aspects of their identity, similar to what they did with poetry writing above. They can use the same questions to explore what they want to express, the art form/expression of their choosing (visual art/painting, drawing, watercolors, sculpture, photography or performing art/skit, video, speech, dance, music, song, spoken word, comedy), and then provide time and space for students to create something. When completed, create a gallery of their artwork and invite other students, families and community members to experience it.
3. Create a similar lesson to this one but instead of poetry, use another genre of literature (i.e., short stories, plays, a novel, first-person narrative, etc.) to reflect on the Jewish experience with different forms of literature and narratives.

### Additional Reading and Resources

- [9 Different Types of Poetry](#) (Penguin)
- [Explore Poems: Judaism](#) (Poetry Foundation)
- [Stories to Celebrate Jewish American Heritage Month](#) (Story Corps, May 23, 2023)
- [Jewish American Heritage Month](#) (poets.org)
- [Jewish American Poetry](#) (My Jewish Learning)
- [Poems of Jewish Faith and Culture](#) (Poetry Foundation)

## Common Core Anchor Standards

| CONTENT AREA/STANDARD                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Reading                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <p>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.</p> <p>R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.</p> <p>R4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.</p> |
| Writing                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <p>W3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.</p> <p>W4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Speaking and Listening                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| <p>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.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| Language                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <p>L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.</p> <p>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.</p>                                                                                           |

## 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.               |

## Excerpts: “The Danger of a Single Story”

(Time stamp: 1 min., 38 sec.)

“What this demonstrates, I think, is how impressionable and vulnerable we are in the face of a story, particularly as children. Because all I had read were books in which characters were foreign, I had become convinced that books, by their very nature, had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which I could not personally identify.”

(Time stamp: 4 min., 21 sec.)

“My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my ‘tribal music’ and was consequently very disappointed when I produced by tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed I did not know how to use a stove. What struck me was this: She had felt sorry for me before she even saw me. Her default position toward me, as an African, was a kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity. My roommate had a single story of Africa, a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way.”

(Time stamp: 8 min., 20 sec.)

“But I must quickly add that I too am just as guilty in the question of the single story. A few years ago, I visited Mexico from the U.S. The political climate in the U.S. at the time was tense, and there were debates going on about immigration. And, as often happens in America, immigration became synonymous with Mexicans. There were endless stories of Mexicans as people who were fleecing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, being arrested at the border, that sort of thing.

I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then, I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself.

So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.”

(Time stamp: 12 min., 58 sec.)

“All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.

Of course, Africa is a continent full of catastrophes: There are immense ones, such as the horrific rapes in Congo and depressing ones, such as the fact that 5,000 people apply for one job vacancy in Nigeria. But there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them.

I’ve always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.”