

LESSON PLAN

Jewish Immigration to the U.S.

Essential Question: *What can we learn about the Jewish experience from their immigration history to the U.S.?*

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

[**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

Since the 1600s, Jewish people have been immigrating to the United States for a variety of reasons. Predating the country's independence, the first Jewish people came to the U.S., fleeing oppression in their home countries, and arrived in New Amsterdam, now New York City. This lesson plan provides an opportunity for students to learn more about the history of Jewish immigration to the U.S. and reflect on a specific period of Jewish immigration.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will reflect on Emma Lazarus' "The New Colossus" and its relevance.
- Students will understand the history of Jewish immigration to the U.S.
- Students will explore a particular time period in Jewish immigration to the U.S.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

- [The New Colossus - Emma Lazarus](#) (1 min., 26 sec.) or ["New Colossus" by Emma Lazarus](#) (1 min., 24 sec., includes captions)
- [The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus](#) (one copy for each student or project on board/smart board)
- [Overview of Jewish Immigration to the U.S.](#) (one copy for each student)
- [The Immigrant Experience in NYC, 1880-1920](#) (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 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



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:

[Jewish American Heritage Month Resources](#)

[Resources to Address and Challenge Antisemitism](#)

Key Words

boarders
collective bargaining
emigrated
harsh
human rights
immigration
infractions
minimum wage
persecution
quotas
refugees
sanitation
Sephardic
shtetls
slogan
sweatshop
teeming
tenement
tempest-tossed
wretched
yearning

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.]

☆ Opening: Emma Lazarus’ “The New Colossus”

1. Show the video [The New Colossus - Emma Lazarus](#) (or use this video, which includes captions: “[New Colossus](#)” by Emma Lazarus). Before watching, explain that the poem they are about to hear was written by Emma Lazarus, who was born into a Sephardic Jewish (Sephardic refers to Jewish people who came from Spain and Portugal, or North Africa) family in 1849 in New York City and was one of the most successful Jewish American writers. Lazarus used her poems and essays to speak out against the persecution of Jewish people in Europe and the growing antisemitism in the U.S. She is most known for her poem, “The New Colossus,” which is engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty. If you don’t use the video with captions, provide students with the words in advance or project on the board/smart board: [The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus](#).

[**Note to Teacher:** If your students are not familiar with the Statue of Liberty, you can share that the Statue of Liberty, located in New York Harbor, is one of the world’s most famous and symbolic monuments. It was gifted to the U.S. by France in 1865-66 and symbolizes freedom, democracy and hope. You can learn more [here](#).]

2. If time permits, have students turn and talk with someone sitting nearby to quickly (1 minute each) discuss their initial thoughts about the poem: *What is the poem about? What does the poem mean to them? How did they feel listening to it?*
3. Reconvene the class and engage students in a brief discussion about the poem, which you can project or distribute using the [The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus](#). Have students underline or circle the words or phrases in the poem that were meaningful or important to them. Explain words that students may not know. Then ask students: *What is Lazarus saying in the poem? What images and metaphors does she use to convey her message? What is your biggest takeaway from reading the poem? What does the poem have to do with immigration?*
4. Focus in on the last five lines of the poem, which is the most famous passage of the poem. They are:

"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!"

Explain and elicit that this passage reflects Lazarus’ concern and compassion for immigrants and refugees and is a message of hopes and dreams for them. The passage also reinforces the idea that at the time, U.S. was seen as a country built by immigrants and that people who leave countries due to persecution, economic hardship and oppression will find a new home in the U.S. The reference to the “golden door” represents a symbol for opportunity and freedom.

What is Immigration?

1. Ask students: *What is immigration?* Elicit/explain that immigration is the process of coming into a foreign or non-native country (not where you are originally from) to live. You can share that the U.S. is home to the world's largest foreign-born population: As of 2023, more than 47 million people living in the U.S. were born in another country. Explain that since the U.S. population is 340 million, that means that 14% (or almost 1 in 7) people in the U.S. were born in another country.
2. Then ask: *Why do people immigrate to other countries, or the U.S. specifically?* Invite students to reflect on their own families or others they know or heard about who have immigrated to U.S.
 - To escape poverty (not having enough money to meet basic needs).
 - To find jobs, opportunities and work because those opportunities are not available in their home country.
 - To get married or join family who came to the country before them.
 - To study or go to school.
 - To escape violence, war, discrimination, persecution (when people are continually treated in a cruel and harmful way, often due to their race, religion or political opinions) or human rights violations.
 - Because they may be forced to leave their homes due to natural disasters (floods, fires, hurricanes, etc.) which may result from the impact of climate change.
3. Explain that today's lesson will focus on the history of Jewish immigration to the U.S.

Overview: Jewish Immigration to the U.S.

Students may follow along with the [Overview: Jewish Immigration to the U.S.](#) handout.

1. Share a brief overview of Jewish immigration to the U.S. including the following, explaining that Jewish people have a long history, are diverse and have immigrated to places all over the world, including the U.S.
 - In 1654, the first Jewish immigrants came to the U.S. Twenty-three Sephardic Jews, (Sephardic Jews trace their ancestry to Spain and Portugal), arrived in New Amsterdam, now New York City.
 - In the mid-1800's, a significant wave of Jewish immigrants arrived to the U.S., mostly settling in various cities/urban areas across the country. Between 1820 and 1880, America's Jewish population increased from 3,000 to 250,000. Approximately 150,000 Jewish people came to the U.S. during these years, the overwhelming majority young German-speaking Central European Jews.
 - Between 1881 and 1924, the largest influx of Jewish immigrants took place. Over two million Jewish people, primarily arriving from Eastern Europe (Russia, Austria-Hungary and Romania) settled in the U.S., fleeing widespread pogroms (violent attacks on the Jewish community), oppressive laws and poverty.
 - Also important to acknowledge that between 1870 and 1900, the largest number of immigrants continued to come from northern and western Europe including Great Britain, Ireland, Scandinavia, Asia and Latin America.
 - The Immigration Act of 1924 (the Johnson-Reed Act) imposed immigrant quotas (a specific amount or number of things) and after that time, while some Jewish people could immigrate, the numbers were greatly reduced.
 - During World War II, Jewish refugees (people who flee persecution, conflict or war) attempted to escape Nazi Germany during the Holocaust. After World War II began in September 1939, it became more difficult for people to emigrate from Europe. With Europe at war, the State Department implemented new restrictions and immigration became almost impossible. Though estimates vary, somewhere between 180,000 and 220,000 European refugees immigrated to the U.S. between 1933 and 1945—although the U.S. government admitted far less than the number of people seeking refuge.

[Note to Teacher: If students have not yet studied the Holocaust, you can share that the Holocaust was a time in history when the German government, run by the Nazi Party, discriminated against Jews and other people they thought were inferior. They ultimately took the lives of Jewish people and many others. For more information, see [Echoes and Reflections](#).]

- After the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 was passed, which abolished the previous quotas, other major groups of Jewish immigrants arrived in the U.S. In the 1970s, Jewish people in the former Soviet Union began coming to America in significant numbers due to the severe religious and cultural repression they faced. At least 500,000 Jewish people from the former Soviet Union left after the collapse of Communism. Another 60,000-80,000 Persian Jews fled Iran following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Thousands of Jews from Latin America immigrated to the U.S. in response to revolution, unrest, persecution and economic collapse.
2. After sharing some or all of this information, engage students in a brief discussion by asking some or all of the following question:
- What do you notice?
 - What do you wonder?
 - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
 - What are some of the main reasons Jewish people immigrated to the U.S.?
 - The reasons people immigrate can be categorized as “push factors” (pushing people away from their homes; people leaving their home due to violence, oppression, persecution or economic hardship) and “pull factors” (pulling people toward the U.S.; people being drawn to a new home or country such as job opportunities, education, health, political and religious freedom). Using the idea of “push” and “pull” factors, which waves of immigration involved push, pull or both factors?



Reading Activity

1. Distribute a copy of the article [The Immigrant Experience in NYC, 1880-1920](#) and explain that it explores one time period in the history of Jewish people immigrating to the U.S. Provide 10-15 minutes for students to read silently or read aloud together. After reading, share some of the photos in this article, that will help bring this period of time to life: [Jewish Immigration to the U.S.](#)
2. After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking some or all of the following questions:
 - What thoughts and feelings came to mind as you read the article?
 - What did you learn that you didn't know before?
 - Why were Jewish people leaving Eastern Europe during this period?
 - Where did they mostly settle when they arrived in the U.S.?
 - What was life like for them in the U.S.?
 - Why did the Jewish people, who often worked in “sweatshops” and large factories when they arrived, get involved in unions?
 - How do you think their experience of persecution in Eastern Europe impacted their efforts for safe and fair working conditions?
 - What does the concept of “bread and roses” mean?
 - What is your biggest takeaway from reading this article?



Closing

Have students share a few words or phrases that describe what they learned about immigration or Jewish immigration to the U.S.

Extension Activity Ideas

1. Learn more about one of the specific waves of Jewish immigration to the U.S. Read articles, conduct research and answer some or all of the following questions: *Why did this wave of immigration take place? What were the push or pull factors? What was the journey like? What was life like for the Jewish people who immigrated during that period?*
2. Engage students in a process where they explore and illustrate what they learned about Jewish immigration to the U.S. through an art project. Ask students: *What did you learn about Jewish immigration to the U.S. that you didn't know before? What aspects of Jewish immigration to the U.S. were important, meaningful or interesting to you? What do you want to share with others? What more do you want to know?* The explain to students that they will have the opportunity to learn more about an aspect of Jewish immigration to the U.S. and then express what they learned through an art project (i.e., timeline, portrait, imagined journal entries, collage, "suitcase of memories," etc. Brainstorm ideas with students, provide time for them to work on the projects, and when completed, set up the room as an art gallery with students displaying their projects and others viewing them.
3. Using Emma Lazarus' poem, "The New Colossus" as a sample, invite students to write a poem about immigration. They can choose to focus on Jewish immigration to the U.S. or another example of immigration in history. As an alternative, students can create a video of themselves reading aloud "The New Colossus" poem by Lazarus and inserting relevant photography and artwork based on their interpretation of the poem.
4. As a class (or can be assigned individually), watch some or all of the videos included in the [Immigrating to America: The Jewish Experience](#), that are part of the Wexler Oral History Project. Discuss each of the videos, the stories of immigration told in the videos: why the people left their home country, what happened during their journey to the U.S. or elsewhere and what life was like for them when they arrived. You can also invite students to write their responses after listening to the stories in the videos.

Additional Reading and Resources

- [A People at Risk](#) (Library of Congress)
- [American Jewry – The Jewish Journey To America](#) (Institute for Curriculum Services)
- [How Many Refugees Came to the United States from 1933-1945?](#) (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
- [Immigrating to America: The Jewish Experience](#) (Yiddish Book Center)
- [Jewish Immigration to America](#) (My Jewish Learning)
- [Tenement Museum](#)
- [The History of Jewish Life in America](#) (Video: Unpacked)
- [The Jewish Americans](#) (PBS)
- [The Journey of the Jewish Americans](#) (PBS Learning Media)
- [Tracing the History of Jewish Immigrants and Their Impact on New York City](#) (Inside Fordham)

Common Core Anchor Standards: Middle School

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. R7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
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. SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. SL5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
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: Middle School

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.

Common Core Anchor Standards: High School

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text. R2: Determine themes or central ideas of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text. R7: Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. SL2: Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source. SL5: Make strategic use of digital media in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies. L5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings. L6: Acquire and use accurately 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 considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.

CASEL's SEL Competencies: High School

COMPETENCIES
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Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

The New Colossus by Emma Lazarus

(source: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46550/the-new-colossus>)

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
Glows 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-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”**

Overview of Jewish Immigration to the U.S.

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