

Exploring Identity and Community in Jewish Life (Pre-war Europe)

 45-50 min  GRADES 6-8

LESSON PLAN

LENS/DOMAIN

Holocaust

SUBJECT

Intolerance

TOPIC

Antisemitism

Overview

In this lesson, students explore Jewish identity and community life in prewar Europe, examining how culture, belonging, and rising antisemitism shaped Jewish experience in the decades before the Holocaust.

This lesson plan has been adapted from the lesson linked here by [Echoes & Reflections](#) on Prewar Jewish Life.

Enduring Understanding

Before World War II, Jewish communities across Europe were vibrant, diverse, and deeply rooted in cultural, intellectual, and civic life. As nationalist movements rose and antisemitism intensified, Jews engaged in urgent debates about identity, belonging, and future, debates that illuminate how communities sustain resilience in the face of escalating prejudice.

Essential Questions

1. What is the impact of culture and community on one's identity?
2. What is the impact of having an identity and customs that differ from the majority population in which you live?
3. How do identity and belonging connect across the past and present?

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Readiness

 10 MIN

Students reflect on the concept of identity as an entry point into Jewish life before WWII.

Prompts (posted on board/handout):

- How do I define and express my identity?
- How does my identity influence my life?
- How do I feel when people challenge my concept of myself?
- Have I ever experienced judgements or assumptions about my identity?

The teacher directs students to select one of the four prompts to answer in writing.

Students select one of the four prompts and write freely for 5-minutes. Encourage students to expand on their answers or answer another question if they finish quickly.

Share-out: Lead the students in sharing. Try to have at least one volunteer per question, so multiple perspectives emerge.

Input

 25 MIN

Print out copies of the handout “[A Picture of Jewish Life in Europe Before WWII](#)” from Echoes & Reflections. Print out the graphic organizer: Jewish Life in Europe Before WWII ([Jewish Life Graphic Organizer](#)). The organizer includes a box for each of the four sections in the article:

- A Time of Challenges
- Modernization
- Rising Antisemitism & Nationalism
- Jewish Reactions

It also includes a box in the middle for a six-word summary of the full text.

Suggested timing:

- Teacher hands out the article and graphic organizer; previews headings: 3 min
- Students read and annotate text: 12 minutes
- Teacher cues and students fill in quadrants: 8 min
- Teacher cues students to write a six-word summary in the center box: 2 min

Student Task:

As students work, they record 1–2 key points for each heading in the appropriate box on the organizer.

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Output

10-15 MIN

As a class, discuss the following questions based on the reading and the notes students collected in their organizers:

1. How did Jewish customs and culture distinguish them from their non-Jewish counterparts?
2. How did Jewish culture adapt over time?
3. **What was the impact of rising antisemitism and nationalism?**
4. **What was the response among Jews?**

This is where it is appropriate and needed to discuss Zionism as a response of some Jews who feared for their safety in Europe. Please see the Educator's Note in the introductory materials.

Wrap-up Question:

- How had Jewish identity been transformed and impacted by the communities in which Jews lived?
- Teachers may choose to return to the Essential Questions to deepen this dialogue.

TEACHER TIPS:

Modifications by Reading Level

Option 1: Scaffolding for students reading below grade level.

- Pre-highlight 1–2 key sentences per section before handing out.
- Students copy or paraphrase those ideas into the organizer.
- Model the first quadrant together as a class.

Option 2: On-level readers

- Students underline or highlight important phrases as they read.
- Transfer notes into quadrants in their own words.
- Aim for at least 1 sentence per quadrant.

Suggestions to Maximize Student Engagement in this class discussion

- **Think–Ink–Pair–Share:** Give students 1–2 minutes to jot down a thought, then pair up to share, and lastly bring ideas into the whole-class conversation.
- **Cold Call + Warm Call Mix:** Call on volunteers first, then follow up by inviting quieter students to share one idea they heard from a partner.
- **Post-It Share:** Have students write one response on a sticky note. Collect and cluster them on the board so multiple voices are represented before the class dialogue.

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WISCONSIN MODEL ACADEMIC STANDARDS:

Social Studies:

Social Studies Inquiry Practices and Processes

SS.Inq1.a.m Formulate open-ended questions for further research within one or more social studies disciplines. Rationale: Students begin with identity reflection and prior knowledge, and the lesson's discussion prompts ask them to generate and explore questions about how culture, community, and prejudice shaped Jewish life before WWII.

SS.Inq2.a.m Explore evidence from multiple reliable sources representing a range of perspectives and media that have been selected through research to guide the inquiry. Rationale: Students read "A Picture of Jewish Life in Europe Before WWII" from Echoes & Reflections, a curated primary and secondary source text, and extract evidence into a four-quadrant organizer to guide discussion.

Behavioral Sciences

SS.BH1.a.m Identify patterns such as culture, prior knowledge, family, peers, school, communities, and personal interests that influence a person's identity and development. Rationale: The lesson is fundamentally about how identity is layered, shaped by community and context, and not always visible. Students examine their own identity before examining how Jewish identity in pre-war Europe was shaped by culture, tradition, modernization, and rising external pressure.

SS.BH3.a.m Examine the role of culture, cultural diffusion, and cultural change on the development of societies and individuals. Rationale: Students analyze how Jewish communities adapted to modernization and nationalism while maintaining distinct cultural practices, and how that tension shaped both individual and communal identity.

History

SS.Hist2.a.m Analyze patterns of continuity and change over time and explain historical contexts that influenced those patterns. Rationale: Students trace how Jewish life in Europe shifted across the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to modernization, nationalism, and rising antisemitism, identifying both what changed and what communities worked to preserve.

SS.Hist3.a.m Connect past events, people, and ideas to the present and use different perspectives to draw conclusions. Rationale: The wrap-up discussion asks students to connect the historical experience of Jewish communities in pre-war Europe to Essential Questions about identity, belonging, and the impact of prejudice, drawing explicit bridges between past and present.

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Wisconsin Model Academic Standards (continued):

English Language Arts:

Reading

R.6.1 / R.7.1 / R.8.1 (RI) Cite textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly and implicitly, and make logical inferences. *Rationale: Students read "A Picture of Jewish Life in Europe Before WWII" and pull specific details into the four-quadrant organizer, then use those details in the whole-class discussion about culture, modernization, antisemitism, and Jewish responses.*

R.6.2 / R.7.2 / R.8.2 (RI) Determine central ideas of an informational text and summarize them objectively. *Rationale: Students identify main ideas for each section of the reading and write a six-word summary in the center of the organizer that captures Jewish life in Europe between the wars.*

R.6.3 / R.7.3 / R.8.3 (RI) Analyze how individuals, events, and ideas are introduced, related to each other, and developed. *Rationale: Students track how modernization, nationalism, and antisemitism affected Jewish daily life and how different Jewish communities responded, including debate about assimilation and Zionism.*

Speaking and Listening

SL.6.1 / SL.7.1 / SL.8.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing one's own clearly. *Rationale: Students use Think–Pair–Share, Think–Ink–Pair–Share, and whole-class discussion to explore identity, belonging, and Jewish life before the Holocaust. They draw on their organizer notes as evidence during discussion.*

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