

Jewish Diaspora

Since 70 CE, Jews have been dispersed around the globe, living in a diaspora that began through forced exile from ancient Israel at the hands of the Roman Empire. For more than 1,900 years, Jews have migrated and formed communities around the world, engaging in acts of preserving belief systems and identity while also participating in cultural exchanges and innovations. Throughout the diaspora, Jews have developed complicated relationships with their new homelands around the world. As minorities in every host society, Jews have been seen as “the other” while also finding opportunities to take root and forge deep ties during periods of acceptance and tranquility. Throughout the diaspora, Jews have proven to be resilient, inventive, and dynamic, allowing for the continuation of the community even while enduring oppression and uncertainty.

In this lesson, students will learn about the Jewish diaspora. By studying poetry, watching short films, and engaging in discussion, students will explore the nuanced issues involved in maintaining an identity, seeking security, and navigating questions of home and belonging. Students will compose their own poetry, showcasing their understanding of and relationship to “home.”

Essential Questions:

1. What is the Jewish diaspora?
2. What challenges and opportunities does living in the diaspora present?
3. How have Jewish people had to demonstrate resilience in the diaspora?

Learning Objectives:

1. Students will be able to develop an understanding of the consequences of the diaspora for Jewish people, emphasizing their relationship to each other and non-Jewish communities.
2. Students will be able to describe the relationship between diaspora, otherness, resilience, and cultural exchange.

Enduring Understandings:

1. The Jewish diaspora is a consequence of exile from the Land of Israel and Jews have experienced multiple forced exiles in the past 2,000 years.
2. In a diaspora, communities experience otherness yet also demonstrate resilience and cultural adaptation.

Sources:

- [Kimchi on the Seder Plate](#)
- [A-WA Music Video](#)

Materials:

- [Jewish Diaspora Slide Deck](#)
- [Hanukkah Lamps](#)
- [Jewish Diaspora Handout](#)
- [African Diaspora Poems Handout](#)



Jewish Diaspora

Lesson Procedures:

Student Reflection: What is Home?

Begin by having students independently write a written reflection on their understanding of and relationship with “home,” using the questions found on [Slide 2](#):

Where would you consider your “home” to be?

What does “home” represent to you?

How does it feel to be “home”?

What words would you use to describe “home”?

Have students keep these reflections to themselves, recognizing that the concept of “home” may be a sensitive topic and that students may feel vulnerable sharing with their peers.

Explain that the concept of “home” can conjure a wide range of emotions, thoughts, and associations and that individuals and communities often have complicated relationships with “home” because of personal or collective histories. Project [Slide 3](#) and read the poem “Prayer” by Ruth Behar, a Cuban Jewish scholar, writer, and poet who lives in the United States but was born in Cuba to parents whose families arrived in Cuba from modern-day Poland and Turkey but who traces their ancestry to Spain. Read the poem and have students discuss what they notice about how Ruth Behar describes “home.”

Direct students to Behar’s line “the keys my ancestors took with them to their exile” and share that they’ll be studying the history of Jews living in “exile” or “dispersion”.

Presentation and Discussion: Jewish Diaspora(s)

Next, have students view the five different images of [Hanukkah Lamps](#), also found on [Slide 4](#), either by hanging the images on the walls or by distributing the images as a handout. These lamps demonstrate the different aesthetic and cultural influences among Jewish communities around the world and across centuries, including those in the Caribbean, Russia, and different cities in the United States from the 18th to 20th century. Pose the questions on [Slide 4](#) and discuss:

What do you notice about these Hanukkah lamps?

What questions do you have about these Hanukkah lamps?



Jewish Diaspora

Why might these lamps have different styles and appearances?

Screen the [Kimchi on the Seder Plate](#) short film featuring Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, who has a Korean-Jewish identity and shares the way different cultural influences have come together in her family's Jewish practices. Pose the question on [Slide 5](#) and discuss:

What does "kimchi on the seder plate" say about Jewish culture and identity?

With these examples of Hanukkah lamps and seder plates in mind, show slides [6](#), [7](#), and [8](#) and introduce students to the term "diaspora" and provide them with an explanation of the origins of the Jewish diaspora from their ancestral home in ancient Israel and their subsequent dispersal around the world to new homelands.

Make this concept of exile and dispersion more concrete through one family's narrative. Segue to three excerpted pages of the [Buckley Family Scrapbook](#) found on the [Jewish Diaspora Handout](#) which traces a Jewish family's multigenerational journey from Spain to Iraq to New York City, also found on [Slide 9](#). The scrapbook is of a Sephardic family (descendants of Jews expelled from Spain in 1492) and demonstrates the deep connection Jews developed with Spain and the multiple expulsions Jews have experienced across time and place, beyond the expulsion from Israel in 70 CE. Have students work with a partner to look at the scrapbook page, answering the following questions:

Where does the family mark the start and end of their wanderings?

How much time is reflected in the history of the family found in the scrapbook?

What does it mean that the family holds onto this much history?

Why did this family have to move so many times?

What does this say about the ways Jews have been treated?

What does this scrapbook teach about the Jewish diaspora?

After discussing the scrapbook, use slides [10](#) and [11](#) to introduce students to the multiple continued expulsions experienced by Jews around the world, some of whom would eventually seek refuge in North America, such as the first Jews to settle on the continent who themselves were descendent of Sephardic Jews who left Spain for Holland before migrating to Brazil and, ultimately, New Amsterdam.

Ask students to turn-and-talk to a classmate, reflecting upon the implications of living in diaspora, using the questions found on [Slide 12](#), which focus on students' skills of thinking about "continuity and change":



Jewish Diaspora

How might living in exile change a community's culture and identity?

What might the community continue to hold onto in exile?

Once students have discussed, show [Slide 13](#) and explain that Jews have engaged in acts of cultural preservation and exchange around the world, both maintaining continued connections to heritage and traditions while also embracing different cultural, linguistic, and other influences that have allowed for diversity and innovation.

Conclude this conversation about the Jewish diaspora by screening the Yeminite Jewish hip hop group [A-WA's music video](#), "Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman" (This is Not Yemen) as a way to tie together the themes students have been exposed to and discussed regarding diaspora, including yearning for home, cultural exchange, connection to homeland, subsequent exile and double diaspora. These themes emerge as A-WA sings in Judeo-Arabic about yearning for Yemen while posing the question "Where will I stake a home?" Have students answer the question found on [Slide 14](#), after listening and viewing:

What about this song connects to the ideas discussed about diaspora?

Note that the lyrics, sung in Judeo-Arabic, are referencing the Book of Deuteronomy in the Torah (8:7-10) which name the "seven species of the Promised Land," showing the complex relationship with home, the land of Israel, and Yemen as a diasporic homeland.

Writing a Found Poem: African Diasporic Voices

Show [Slide 15](#) and briefly inform students that Jews are not the only community to experience a diaspora. Share that the African, Lebanese, and Irish diasporas are three examples of communities that have been uprooted from their ancestral homes and that these communities each have complex histories of oppression, resilience, and survival.

Show [Slide 16](#) and explain that students will be reading and finding inspiration from African American poets who have written about home and the African diaspora. Share that students will be crafting their own "found poem" by identifying words or phrases in the poems that resonate with them and then arranging them to create their own original poem about "home." Distribute the [African Diaspora Poems Handout](#) which includes four poems authored by Amanda Gorman, Nikki Grimes, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

Have students return to their original reflections about "home" from earlier in the lesson. Encourage students to find language in the four poems that relates to that reflection.

