

# Jewish Peoplehood

Jews have existed for thousands of years, evolving and innovating throughout history. Defining the Jewish people requires an understanding of the intricacies of Jewish life while recognizing the limitations of collective identity categories such as race, religion, and culture. People can embrace Judaism and become members of the Jewish people. Not simply a religious community, many Jews identify as secular, cultural, agnostic, or atheistic while still holding onto deep and affirmative Jewish identities. The Jewish people are diverse in every way imaginable, speaking different languages, living on different continents, practicing Judaism differently, and embodying every race and ethnicity imaginable. Yet, they are a people bound together through deep ties. The concept of “mishpacha” or family and the connection to central texts, ancestral homeland, and history weave Jewish people together, even as distinctions in religiosity and customs reflect variation. The metaphor of a mosaic is one way of thinking about Jewish peoplehood, all of which coalesce into a larger whole.

In this lesson, students will receive an introduction to the Jewish people while also reflecting upon the communities that provide them with a sense of meaning and belonging. They will encounter different Jewish voices who offer a variety of perspectives Jewish peoplehood. Students will then use the metaphor of a pomegranate mosaic to organize information about Jewish peoplehood. The lesson culminates with students creating their own mosaic, selecting their own symbol, and crafting their own self-definition of their identity based on the communities to which they belong.

## Essential Questions:

1. Who are the Jewish people?
2. What does it mean to be a member of a community?

## Learning Objectives:

1. Students will be able to develop an understanding of the Jewish people by comparing and discussing multiple voices and perspectives.
2. Students will be able to describe the features of communities to which they belong, using a mosaic as a metaphor.

## Enduring Understandings:

1. The Jewish people are a joinable extended family, connected by a shared history, ancestral homeland, and central texts, yet are remarkably diverse.
2. Communal identities are complex and multifaceted, offering membership and belonging while allowing for internal diversity.

## Sources:

- [Michael Twitty film](#)

## Materials:

- [Jewish Peoplehood Slide Deck](#)
- [Jewish Identity and Belonging Handout](#)



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## Lesson Procedures:

### Raising Questions and Sparking Curiosity: Identity, Community, and Belonging

Explain to the class that they will be discussing the concepts of identity and belonging, reflecting on the identities of their own communities while learning about the multiple aspects of Jewish identity.

Distribute the Jewish Identity and Belonging Handout and begin by having students reflect on their identities in the My Communities section, independently completing the sentence stems, also found on [Slide 2](#):

*I belong to the following communities: \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I feel most like I belong when \_\_\_\_\_.*

*My communities give me \_\_\_\_\_.*

*I give my community \_\_\_\_\_.*

Next, have students write a list of customs, symbols, holidays, and/or foods that are part of the communities to which they belong, sharing which community each item on the list is associated with, with instructions found on [Slide 3](#).

Ask for volunteers to share their responses to the sentence stems and list, taking note of the diversity of communities represented in the class.

Have students complete the Activating Prior Knowledge of Jewish People section, completing a T-Chart with the following prompts, also found on [Slide 4](#):

*Write a list of beliefs, customs, symbols, holidays, or foods that you associate with Jewish people.*

*Where did you learn what you know about Jewish people?*

Have students share their lists of associations and the sources.

Next, have students complete the Sparking Curiosity about Jewish People section of the Jewish Identity and Belonging Handout, generating their own list of questions, in response to the following prompt, also found on [Slide 5](#):

*What would you like to learn about Jewish people and Judaism?*



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Have students share their questions and see what patterns or themes emerge. Write these questions down so they are visible throughout the lesson.

## Small Group Discussion: Jews as a Family

Direct students to the Making Connections page of the Jewish Identity and Belonging Handout, also found on [Slide 6](#), which includes an image of a pomegranate. The pomegranate was chosen as it possesses symbolic significance in Judaism. Pomegranates are one of the “seven species of Israel” mentioned in the Torah, represent love and abundance, and symbolize the 613 commandments in Judaism. Explain that the tiles of the pomegranate mosaics serve as a note catcher for students to write down new words and concepts that add to their understanding of Jewish peoplehood. Share that they should add to this page throughout the lesson, whenever there is a new connection made that expands their knowledge of Jewish people.

Assign students to small discussion groups. Project [Slide 7](#), showing a collage of Jewish people, and pose the following question to students:

*All of these people identify as Jewish. What do you notice about this collage?*

*What do you think connects all these people to one another?*

Show [Slide 8](#) and ask students if Jews are a race, culture, religion, or ethnicity. After hearing from students, explain that Jewish identity intersects with multiple other identities and that they will continue to learn more about Jewish peoplehood, hearing from individuals who reflect these intersections.

Screen the [Michael Twitty](#) film on Jewish Peoplehood. After viewing the segment, project [Slide 10](#), which calls out the term “mishpacha” or family, used by Twitty. Have students discuss the following questions in small groups:

*Michael Twitty said, “Judaism is not a faith. Judaism is the religious culture of the Jewish people.” What does this mean in your own words?*

*Michael Twitty said, “You always have some kind of family and kinfolk to cling to.” Who are your kinfolk and what makes that family special to you?*

Next, share and read the text on [Slide 11](#), inspired by author and journalist, Dara Horn. Have students discuss the question on [Slide 12](#) with the Dara Horn text in mind:

*What new layers to Jewish peoplehood does Dara Horn add to Michael Twitty’s definition?*



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*What about Dara Horn's definition is interesting to you? Why?*

## Teacher Presentation: Jewish Peoplehood

Show slides [13](#) through [20](#) and build upon the explanations of Jewish peoplehood already offered by Michael Twitty and Dara Horn, offering students an overview of the Torah, beliefs, behaviors, symbols, rituals, foods, and customs that provide Jews who choose to participate in them a sense of belonging to peoplehood.

Once more, return to the questions students generated earlier in class. Ask which questions have been answered and whether any new questions have emerged. Allow time for students to add new information to their pomegranate mosaics note catchers.

## My Communities and Our Identities: Centering Self-Definition

Have students complete the My Communities and Our Identities section of the Handout. Show the instructions on [Slide 21](#) and ask students to: 1) draw a symbol that is important to them and which represents the communities that they belong to and to create titles within that symbol, turning it into a mosaic that they can fill with terms that are significant to them and their communities, 2) list the beliefs, behaviors, and ways of belonging that are significant to their communities, and 3) craft a one-sentence identity statement that ties together the different parts of their identities and includes the multiple communities that they belong to. Have students share those statements.

