



Beyond the Family Tree:

Jewish History and Diversity Through Family Languages and Names



Introduction and Teacher Guide

What:

In this project-based curriculum unit, students will learn about Jewish history and the commonality and diversity of the Jewish community – local and international, contemporary and historical – through family stories about names and languages. After lessons introducing students to Jewish migration patterns and cultural diversity, each student will interview relatives, both of the parent and grandparent generations, about their family's migration stories, the names their family used, and the languages their family spoke and speaks today. Students will present highlights of their interviews in class and then in a showcase to which families are invited, using various media and formats such as visual art, drama, film, presentation with slides, or science fair tri-fold board.

Why:

This diversity, equity, and inclusion-focused unit provides an alternative to the Ashkenormative orientation of many Jewish educational institutions. It introduces students to the diversity of Jews around the world, past and present, and enables them to see themselves as part of that mosaic.

Most Jewish students have heard of Hebrew and Yiddish but are not aware of the many other languages their families and classmates' families may have spoken – from Ladino to Judeo-Arabic, from Judeo-Hamedani to Jewish Neo-Aramaic. Students may think of certain family names as Jewish, but they may not be aware of the many names that have become part of Jewish communities through conversion, intermarriage, and international migration. "Beyond the Family Tree" addresses these needs in a way that empowers students and families and strengthens schools and communities.

How:

This unit offers a diversity of approaches to address the variety of learning styles in the classroom. Activities include full class discussions, chevruta-based projects, writing, drama, visual art, and digital-based learning experiences.

Introduction and Teacher Guide

Who:

This unit is designed for students in grades 5–12 and may be used in both Jewish day school and supplemental school settings. When appropriate, the lessons offer options for older and younger students or students with less or more Hebrew background. Feel free to adapt the lessons to your students' needs.

When:

Any time of year is appropriate for this unit. Each lesson is designed to take 45–50 minutes. We offer nine lesson plans, which can be mixed and matched. We recommend using all nine, but we recognize that this is not possible in all classroom settings. While even teaching one lesson would be valuable, teaching at least three would offer a more expansive experience. Lessons 2–7 (marked with an asterisk) may be used as stand-alone lessons.

Unit Learning Objectives

Through this unit, students will understand that:

- At various points in history, Jews migrated to new countries due to economic opportunity, regime change, and oppression/persecution.
- After migration, Jewish communities experienced tensions between assimilation and cultural retention.
- Jewish communities in different regions are culturally distinct, and it is important to be aware of and include this diversity in Jewish communal activity.
- Their family's story is connected to a larger Jewish story.

This unit addresses essential questions, such as:

- What led Jews to migrate to different parts of the world?
- How did Jewish migration patterns impact Jewish culture, including languages and names?
- To what extent did Jewish communities assimilate into the host cultures of the countries to which they moved?
- How is my family's story connected to larger stories of Jewish migration?

Unit Learning Objectives

By the end of this unit, students will be familiar with:

- Patterns of Jewish migration
- Diverse places Jews have lived
- Languages Jews have spoken
- How Jewish languages are similar to and distinct from their base languages
- How patterns in Jewish family names reflect geography, occupation, characteristic, and parental names
- Their own family histories, including family names and languages, and their place in a larger Jewish story

By the end of this unit, students will be able to:

- Read and interpret maps
- Conduct research online
- Plan and conduct interviews
- Develop theories based on evidence/research
- Synthesize information in written or creative forms

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Lesson 1: Introduction and Classroom Community

- Class generates a list of things they want to know about their synagogue or school community's diversity using a K/W/L chart

*Lesson 2: Jewish Migration: Where, When, Why, and How?

- Students generate a list of things they want to know about their family migration stories using a K/W/L chart
- Students may opt to ask a relative about some of the stories they want to learn more about. Families may fill out an online survey that will populate an interactive map of the class's family names and migration patterns. (Optional Family Participation)**

*Lesson 3: Synagogues and Languages: A Part Of and Apart From

*Lesson 4: Language Spotlight: Iranian Jewish Languages

*Lesson 5: Language Spotlight: Ladino

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*Lesson 6: Hebrew Words in Jewish Languages

*Lesson 7: What's in a Name?

- Interview 1: Students interview a parent about the history of naming and names in their family (Family Participation)**

Lesson 8: Family Research and Interview Preparation

- Interview 2: Students interview a grandparent or other older relative about their family's migration and language histories
- Homework: Conduct interview and return to class with completed interview worksheet (Family Participation)**

Lesson 9: Preparing Creative Projects and Community Showcase

- Homework: (or classtime) Work on creative project
- Schedule a community showcase and invite students' families to attend (Family Participation)**

* Can be used as standalone lessons.

** Family participation, in the form of parent and grandparent interviews and attendance at a community showcase, is critical to these lessons. Please communicate with families to share information about this project, set expectations for student-conducted interviews, and share deadlines for completing interviews.

Background Information for Teachers

[Introduction to Jewish Languages and FAQs](#)

[Resources related to Jewish Languages](#)

How to Use this Curriculum

You can decide which lessons to use based on your educational goals and the number of lessons you can allot to this unit. If you have 8–10 sessions, you will be able to place family interviews and the creative project in the context of Jewish history, Jewish diversity, and contemporary Jewish life.

It is important to note that students will have varying connections to Jewish history, Jewish languages, and even to their own family stories. Feel free to adapt, expand or adjust these materials so that they are most appropriate for your classroom.

Focus on Family Stories through Languages and Names

If you only have 3 sessions, start with background information on Jewish diversity by showing this [video](#), and teach lessons 1, 7, and 8. Even if you aren't using Lesson 2, we recommend completing the family map survey so your class's data can be included in the interactive map.

Exploring Languages Only

If you have 1 session, use Lesson 3.

If you have 2 sessions, pair Lesson 3 and your choice of lessons 4, 5, or 6 for a deeper dive into Jewish linguistic diversity.

If you have 3 sessions, teach Lessons 1, 2, and 3 for personal connections to Jewish diversity and Jewish linguistic diversity, or teach Lessons 3, 5, and 6 for a focus on languages around the world.

Exploring Names Only

If you have 1 session, use Lesson 7.

If you have 2 sessions, pair Lessons 2 and 7 for a deeper dive into names and how they relate to patterns of Jewish migration.

If you have 3 sessions, use Lessons 2, 3, and 7.

Exploring Family Names and Languages

If you have 2 sessions, pair Lessons 3 and 7 for a deeper dive into Jewish diversity through the lens of names and languages.

If you have 3 sessions, teach Lessons 3, 6, and 7.

Citation

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Support

If you have questions or suggestions, please contact the HUC-JIR Jewish Language Project:
<https://www.jewishlanguages.org/contact>.