

LESSON 3: SYNAGOGUES AND LANGUAGES

Theme/Topic/Big Ideas: Acculturation and preservation of Jewish traditions in new communities

Summary: In this lesson, students will investigate visual images and word samples to learn more about how Jews have lived as a part of and apart from their host communities.

Essential Question(s)

- How have Jewish migrations impacted the expression of Jewish culture, including language?
- To what extent have Jewish communities integrated culturally into the host cultures of the countries to which they have moved?
- What languages have Jews spoken?

Objective:

In this lesson, students will:

- Understand that Jewish communities have experienced tensions between integration and distinctiveness.
- Learn that Jews live and have lived in diverse locations throughout the world.
- Learn that Jews speak and have spoken languages that are both similar to and distinct from the languages spoken by their non-Jewish neighbors.

Time: 45 minutes

Handouts and Visuals Link

Materials and setup

- Projector and computer
- Synagogue and map images slideshow
- Jewish language word cards and investigation worksheets

Materials and setup (continued...)

- Language information packets containing an information sheet, 3–5 “fun fact” or “word of the day” cards, and a link to a video (optional)
 - Ladino
 - Judeo-Arabic
 - Juhuri (pronounced joo-hoo-REE)
 - Judeo-Persian
 - Bukharian
 - Yiddish
- Tablets or computers for each group, if opting to have groups watch online videos or do supplemental research
- Pens or pencils

Background Information for Educators:

For a deep dive into Jewish languages, their history, and how they are similar to and distinct from other languages:

<https://www.jewishlanguages.org/about>

A video overview of Jewish languages: [Intro to Jewish Languages by Sarah Bunin Benor](#)

About the synagogues and their surrounding communities:

- Mikve Israel–Emanuel <https://snoa.com/our-synagogue/> and Curaçao <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/curacao-virtual-jewish-history-tour>
- Six-Domed Synagogue <http://archive.diarna.org/site/detail/public/2942/> and Quba, Azerbaijan <http://archive.diarna.org/site/detail/public/3029/>
- Slat al Azama synagogue <http://archive.diarna.org/site/detail/public/3055> and Bahia Palace in Marrakech, Morocco <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/marrakesh>

Introduction: DISCUSS: Image Investigation (10 min)

Handout Link

As an introduction to today's topic, we're going to start by looking carefully at a few images of buildings.

Start by showing the students images 1, 3, and 5, and ask:

- What do you see in these images?
- What is familiar? What is unfamiliar?
- What do you see that could place each of these buildings in a cultural or geographic context?
- What do you see that could be an indication of Jewish tradition?
- What hypotheses do you have about the locations and uses of these buildings?



Share with students that these buildings are synagogues.

Let's compare these synagogues to buildings in their surroundings (image 2, 4, and 6):

- Mikve Israel-Emanuel synagogue in Curaçao, an island nation in the Caribbean, built in 1732, and other buildings nearby
- Six Dome Synagogue "Alti Gumbaz" in Quba, Azerbaijan, and a nearby mosque
- Slat al Azama synagogue (courtesy of [Diarna](#)) and Bahia Palace in Marrakech, Morocco
- How are the synagogues similar to and different from their surroundings? Why do you think this might be?
- As we noticed when we investigated these images, Jewish communities have integrated elements of their "host" communities into Jewish religious and communal life. Let's investigate another way we might see evidence of this.

EXPLORE: Word Sleuths! (15 min)

Omer Link

Prepare the Omer cards by printing them out and folding them in half so that the city and language are on the back side of the card. (During other times of the year, you might want to replace the Omer cards with content related to Rosh Hashanah, Tu Bishvat, or Passover and tweak the lesson plan accordingly.) Note to your students that the second line is a transliteration of the first, if it is not already written using the Latin (English) alphabet.

Divide students into pairs. Each pair receives two cards with a phrase on one side of the card, and the name of the language it is written in and city/town and country where it is/was said that way on the other side (fold the printouts in advance), plus a question worksheet.

Worksheet Link

The phrase on your cards is “Today is the Xth day of the Omer” in a particular language.

Using the questions on the worksheet as a guide for a “pair share” conversation, each pair examines each phrase without looking at the other side of the card:

Then switch cards with another group and repeat the activity so each pair sees four cards. Come back to the full group to reflect and summarize.

Ask students to share what conclusions they were able to draw from this investigation. Reflections might include:

- Jews around the world speak many different languages.
- The word “omer” is used in all of the phrases (or other Hebrew words if you’re using different holiday greetings).
- Jews around the world share holidays and traditions but have different holiday greetings and ways of talking about the traditions.
- Jews around the world incorporate Hebrew words into their languages.

Share the Jewish English card (49) with the full class. Ask: Would someone who’s not Jewish or has no Jewish education understand this sentence? Do you think it’s English? It is English, but it’s a distinctive variety of English: Jewish English. [We’ll talk more about that another day.]

EXPLORE: Word Sleuths! (15 min)

[Handout Link](#)

Share with students:

Throughout the world, wherever Jews have lived, they have spoken and written similarly to their non-Jewish neighbors. But their languages have also been distinct from the surrounding languages. Some Jewish languages have differed by only a few embedded Hebrew words, but others have been so different in grammar and pronunciation that Jews and non-Jews could barely understand each other's languages.



How does the language activity connect to the synagogue investigation?

- Both the synagogues and the phrases were similar to the surrounding culture but distinct based on use of Hebrew and religious observance
- Wherever Jews migrated to, they picked up the local culture but Judaified it
- Jews have been a part of and apart from the surrounding society
- Show a few images of multilingual siddurim to emphasize this point (to be found in handout link)

Let's now learn more about Jewish languages, who speaks them, where, and why.

EXPLORE: Where do Jewish Languages Come From? (5 min)

[Handout Link](#)

Display the map and/or the timeline (found in handout link). Note the Jewish communities all over the world, who speak many different languages. Ask:

- Which of these languages are familiar to you?
- Which are new to you?

EXPLORE: Learning More About Jewish Languages (15 min)

Handout Link

Let's look more closely at some of these languages.

- Ladino
- Judeo-Arabic
- Juhuri
- Judeo-Persian
- Bukharian
- Yiddish

Divide students into 5–6 groups or pairs. Each group receives a packet containing an information sheet, 3–5 “fun facts” or “word of the day” cards (printable versions [here](#)), and a link to a video. For more information, students may use the related page on the Jewish Languages website: <https://www.jewishlanguages.org/languages>

In their groups, students review information about their assigned language. Each group should come away with:

- Three new facts about this Jewish community and their language;
- One new word to teach the class;
- One question they have.

Reflection/Conclusion: (5 min)

As a group, do a “whip around,” with each group teaching their new word to the class, and sharing its language of origin.