



## TRIBAL EXPLORATIONS

Submitted by: YEHUDIS FISHMAN

Subject Area(s): Jewish Living and Identity, Jewish History and Culture, Torah/Talmud, Israel, Values, Art

Multi-lesson Unit

Target Age Groups: Adaptable for all Ages

Lesson Objectives: To familiarize students with a variety of information regarding the Twelve Tribes of Israel

There has been much exploration lately regarding the nature and identity of the twelve tribes of Israel. Documentaries such as, 'In Search of the Lost Tribes, and 'Quest for the Lost Tribes', and Lost Tribes Decoded, have sparked much contemporary interest in the 12 tribes of Israel.

This seems to me a fertile field of a broad range of educational projects for Jewish schools. From flags to jewels, from geographical to mystical associations, Jewish literature is replete with information about the tribes. There are a great many projects that could be related to exploring what makes each tribe unique, and at the same time to explore how each tribe relates to and assists all the others.

This project is suitable for any grade and level, depending on the particular focus. Younger grades could work on learning the names of the tribes and their meanings, the symbols, flags, and colors associated with each tribe, the Hebrew months that are associated with each of the tribes, the particular Hebrew letters associated with each tribe and Hebrew month, and the specific locations of each tribe on the map of Israel during Biblical times.

Older classes could focus on the special talents and abilities of the tribes, the names of tribal leaders and their significance, the roles of the tribes during Biblical history and their possible whereabouts in post Biblical times. Regarding the 'lost' tribes, there is much fascinating speculation about where their descendents might be nowadays, based on linguistic, cultural and archeological information.

For an entire Hebrew school, this could be a multi-class project that involves all the students in individualized, but interrelated, projects: A kind of multi-faceted tapestry which is actually most reflective of the Jewish people as a whole. If practically possible, both older and younger children could chose or be assigned to a particular tribe, and work together on various projects, which could then be presented as a collective presentation at the end of the year. Many modes of learning and design could be involved. Studying TaNaCH, dramatizing



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the story of Joseph and his brothers, art activities, web research, reading books, analyzing the Hebrew language, learning about the geography and early culture and economics of Israel, are just some ideas that could greatly enrich any students' base of Jewish knowledge and identity, in any type of Hebrew school setting.

### SOURCES: A

The first source is a Chumash, either in Hebrew or translation depending on the type of school and background of the students. There are three areas in Torah that focus on the differences between the twelve tribes. These are; The birth of the tribes as recorded in Genesis 29-30, the blessings that Jacob gave to his sons before he passed away in Genesis 49, and the blessings that Moses gave to each tribe before he passed away, in the last portion of Deuteronomy. Each of these sections can be studied independently or as a basis of comparison with each other. Some questions to focus on are:

How are the meanings of the names of the twelve sons related to their lives? Are they connected with circumstances of their births, or to character traits, or to experiences in later life, both individually and as tribes. If the connection is with future experiences, how can parents know these at birth? (hint: the sages say that parents are endowed with a form of prophecy in giving Hebrew names to their children.) If relevant, a great discussion could ensue as to what Hebrew names the students might like to give their future children, or why they think they have received their names.

Which sons/tribes received an explicit blessing and why?

Is there a particular focus on the blessings as a whole? (hint: One commentary, the Abarbanel, relates the focus of Jacob's blessings to be on the tribe that has outstanding qualities of leadership among the Jewish people.)

If any of the tribes do not seem to receive what the students would call a blessing, can this fact help redefine the definition of a blessing? (hint: In Hebrew the word for blessing is 'Bereicha,' also related to a spring, or emerging fountain. Some commentaries explain that a true blessing either brings out a hidden potential, or points out and helps remove an existing obstacle to that potential.)

Why are Shimon and Levi, who are linked together in Jacob's blessings, treated so differently in Moses's blessings? (hint: The Golden Calf was a key incident in the desert and these two tribes acted very differently.)



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The Torah also discusses at length the camping order of the tribes in the desert. Why do clusters of tribes come together? For middle school in particular, the question of why friendships and loyalties form could be fascinating and informative.

### SOURCES: B

The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings are replete with stories of famous and infamous personalities whose tribal roots are emphasized. Studies of these personalities and their tribal connections could lend themselves to interesting discussions with older students regarding the relationship between influences such as Nature vs. Nurture, and Predestination vs. Free Choice. A key principal would be the line from Harry Potter- 'It's not the gifts you are given, but what you do with them that determines who you are.' Also relevant would be the line from Spiderman !!: 'With greater power comes greater responsibility.'

### SOURCES: C

The Talmud, Midrash, and Torah commentaries are a rich source of tribal information. In particular, the opening chapters of Midrash Rabbah on Numbers discusses at great length the unique identity of each tribe, based on the symbolism of their offerings on the opening days of the inauguration of the Tabernacle in the desert. This is a wonderful opportunity for children think creatively and diversively about similar objects and experiences. For example, each tribe brought a silver bowl, but to one tribe it represented the universe, and to another, a bowl of fruit, etc. If the tribes were studied biblically, this could be a good chance to have the students guess what the object would represent, based on their understanding of the nature of each tribe.

There is also much rabbinical commentary about the twelve flags of each tribe, as well as the jewels on the Choshen, the breastplate worn by the High priest in the Temple. The jewels were supposed to contain both physical and spiritual energies associated with each one. There is some debate about modern correspondences of stones with the Hebrew terms for them in the Torah. This could be used in conjunction with secular studies of minerals and their properties, as discovered to date.

Finally, the area that encompasses Torah, Tanach, and much of Rabbinical literature is the geographical locations of the tribes, and the relationship of those locations to each tribes history and experiences in the land of Israel and well as in the Diaspora.

One source of much of the above material is a wonderfully documented description of each tribe, in a book called, 'THE SHEVATIM- The blessings and history of the Tribes of Israel as they appear in the Torah.' By, Rabbi Moshe Polter, printed by Targum Press in 2004.