



## 350 Years: The History of the Jews in America

Submitted by: Suzanne Sobczak

### 350 Years: The History of the Jews in America 1492-1775

**Subject Area:** Religious Education/ History of Jewish Communities

**Target Age Group(s):** Middle School Students – Grades 6-8

#### Abstract

Three days after the expulsion of the Jews, Christopher Columbus set sail for India. His fleet of three ships instead landed on the shores of North America in what is now Cuba. Of the ninety sailors, historians have identified five as Converso/or Crypto Jews (Jews forced by the Spanish Inquisition to Convert to Catholicism yet practiced many Jewish rituals in secret). Speculation has it that they sailed in hope of finding a community more hospitable than Spain. One crew member, Luis de Torres (a Converso), was a man who knew Hebrew, Arabic, and Spanish. He was the ships interpreter and was the first crew member to set foot on North American soil.

Columbus' journey was not a direct route to America for the Jewish population that had fled from Spain. For the next 162 years the Jews searched for an accepting community. Although a small hand full of Jews did sail to North America many more fled to Portugal for safety. But in 1497 Portugal and Spain signed an agreement and once again the Jews were forced to be expelled or convert. Even as many Jews fled to other parts of Europe and North Africa safety was only momentary. In 1518 the Inquisition made it illegal for any Jews/Converso to form settlements in any new country.

Jews who did manage to escape to safety left to the Netherlands. By 1581 Holland had won its independence for Spain. The Dutch who were Calvinist accepted other religions and strongly opposed the Inquisition. Conditions continued to get better for the Jewish population after the Dutch captured Pernambuco, Brazil, in 1630. The Dutch West India Company governed the colony and wanted to be a success. The company recruited Jewish settlers and gave them the same rights as those given to Christians. By 1640 there were more than 1,000 Jews in Brazil. Most of these Jews settled in and around the city of Recife, Brazil. Two synagogues were established and Recife became the first legally recognized Jewish community in the New World.

Unfortunately, the freedom the Jews found in Recife lasted only a short time. In 1654 the Portuguese recaptured the colony. The remaining 600 Jews were once again expelled. Some returned to Holland while others left for the New World.

The first group of openly Jewish settlers arrived in New Amsterdam (New York) in 1654. The Ste. Catherine brought a group of six families totaling twenty-three people, including thirteen children and two widows. These twenty-three Jews began what is now the largest, most prosperous, and most successful Jewish communities in the history of the Diaspora.




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### Materials Needed

- Two different color poker chips, large beads, or buttons.
- Article, Challenge and Change: History of the Jews in America, pp.4-6, Behrman House, Inc.
- One package of sticky notes.
- 11 minute Video, from the JCC HaSifirria Library, Touro Synagogue Newport, Rhode Island.
- The Golden Land: The Story of Jewish Immigration to America, Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph, pp 4 – Replica of a speech given by George Washington in support of the Jewish community.

### Procedure

- Activity #1 each student will be asked to choose one of the color poker chips, I used blue and white. The students will than be divided into two groups, a blue group and a white group. The blue group will become the Jews who chose to stay in Spain even after the edict. They will be asked to come up with at least three reasons why they chose to stay. The white group will become the Jews who left Spain. They are also asked to come up with three reasons but they are to focus on why they chose to leave Spain. [Some possible responses to stay: This was their home and people did not want to leave Spain for cultural and historical reasons. There were family members who could not leave due to age or illness so others chose to stay with them. Fear of the unknown. The temptation to convert and retain their wealth and prestige. The knowledge that they could convert yet secretly practice Judaism, the crypto Jews, and therefore retain their language and homeland.] [Some possible responses to leave: Fear of persecution. Hope of a better life. The Choice to retain ones Jewish Identity. The excitement of the New World.].....time allotment around 15 min.
- Activity #2 the students we be again divided into groups. This time into small study groups of 2-3 students. The students will read the article, Jews in the New World, pp. 4-6, from Challenge and Change: History of the Jews in America, Behrman House, Inc. Their assignment is to read the text and mark it with symbols to demonstrate any reactions they may have to the information. Such symbols could include: heart  for loved this statement, a question mark (?) for didn't get it, an exclamation mark (!) for a wow statement, or a symbol that they come up with which they could justify. The small groups will discuss the article



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and their symbols while the instructor circulates and sits for a short period of time with each group.....time allotment around 25 min.

- Activity #3 through the text a statement was made that likened the Jews arrival in America to the arrival of the Pilgrims. Each student should be given two sticky notes on which they are instructed to not speak to anyone and come up with one reason how the Jews were like the Pilgrims and how the Jews were unlike the Pilgrims. Once finished they were asked to roam around the classroom with their sticky notes on their shirts and read what each other wrote. This brief activity is followed by a discussion that highlights the students reactions to each others statements. [How the Pilgrims were like the Jews: Both groups wanted religious freedom. How they were different: The Pilgrims came by choice and had some money. Whereas most of the Jews had been expelled from their homes, and all of their possessions and money had been confiscated.].....time around 15 min.
- Activity #4 What makes a community? In many of the first communities the first thing that was purchased was land for a cemetery, a school was than developed, and finally a place of worship. One of the oldest Synagogues that still exist and is still in use is the Touro Synagogue of Newport, Rhode Island. The students will watch an 11 minute video on the Touro Synagogue borrowed from the JCC HaSifria Library.....time around 20 min.
- Activity #5 the last activity of class will be the examination of a replicated document written by George Washington in support of the Jewish community of Rhode Island. What was the significance of this written communication? An excerpt: *May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while everyone whall sit under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid...President George Washington (1790).* After examining this document, The Golden Land: The Story of Jewish Immigration to America, Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph, pp. 4, students will discuss the involvement of the Jews in the American Revolutionary War (1776) and the letter from George Washington .....time around 20 min.

### Questions to consider

1. What events led up to the Jews eventual journey to the 'New World'?
2. Do you think the first Jews were Sephardic or Ashkenazi?
3. How far back does the American Jewish community date?
4. Why do you think that so many Jews were involved in the revolutionary war as patriots?



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5. What is your opinion to why these communities' first priority was to buy land for a cemetery?
6. How were the Jews like and not like the Pilgrims?
7. What different traditions and practices have Jewish communities of the past kept or created in an effort to promote Jewish continuity?

### Comments and Feedback

This is the first part of a two-part unit on the History of Jews in America. In this class the students learn how the first Jews, twenty three immigrants arrived, from Recife, Brazil in 1654, into the Port of New Amsterdam (New York). They learn that these first Jews were mainly Dutch, Spanish, and Italian. They were primarily Sephardic. They formed the first congregations in New York (1695), Rhode Island (1763), and Philadelphia (1771). And that these first Jews fought in the Revolutionary War of 1776. Students experience through these mini activities the journey that led the Jews to America and the history of Jewish involvement in making America and its constitution.

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Rosenberg, Shelley Kapneck. Challenge and Change: History of the Jews in America. New Jersey: Berhman House, Inc., 2004.

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<http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/presidency/hebrew/hebrew2>



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[http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/jb/colonial/jewish\\_1](http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/jb/colonial/jewish_1)

<http://www.borisamericanjews.org/flag.htm>

<http://www.tourosynagogue.org/>

[www.eyesofglory.com/jewhist.htm](http://www.eyesofglory.com/jewhist.htm)

[www.fau.edu/library/brody3.htm](http://www.fau.edu/library/brody3.htm)

## 350 Years: The History of the Jews in America 1830-1900

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**Subject Area:** Religious Education/ History of Jewish Communities

**Target Age Group(s):** Middle School Students – Grades 6-8

### **Abstract:**

By 1830 what began as a Jewish community of twenty-three became a prosperous community of 10,000 to 15,000 Jews. These Jews were no longer just Sephardic but were Ashkenazi originating from Eastern Europe. By now the Ashkenazim outnumbered the Sephardim by a ratio of ten to one. But the truly first big wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in the late 1830's. They arrived from Germany, Poland, Austria, and Hungary. By 1880, there were between 230,000 and 300,000 Jews in America.

The new immigrants played an important role in America's growing economy, especially in manufacturing and sales. Many of these immigrants began as peddlers who eventually set up shops. In time, Jewish immigrants became manufacturers of various goods, including clothing and shoes. In New York by 1880, Jews owned about 80 percent of all retail and 90 percent of all wholesale clothing firms. One of the first successful department stores was owned and operated by a Jewish family this store is known as Macy's.

The Jewish community affected life in America economically as well as politically and philosophically. They impacted American society by introducing many





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new cultural customs, words, & foods. They also changed Jewish life by introducing Reform & Conservative Judaism. Jewish community life was developing in the United States as they paved the way for many philanthropic, social, cultural, recreational, and educational institutions were being formed. Benevolent societies provided needy families with food, fuel, loans, shelter, care for the sick, and burial. These charitable organizations were not only a benefit to the Jewish population but were available for all needy individuals. In the 1850's the YMHA (adapted from the YMCA) began. But while the YMCA's activities were mostly religious and athletic, the YMHA's programs included literary groups, classes in both religious and secular interests, athletics, lectures, orchestras, glee clubs, libraries, drama, cooking, debates on topics of Jewish interest, and sometimes, employment bureaus.

The Jewish community today continues to affect American life in positive ways and is only a continuation of the first American Jewish community. When learning about the history of America it is necessary to learn about the history of the American Jews and to have pride in our ancestors' legacy.

### Materials Needed:

- Recipe from, Jewish Cooking in America, by Joan Nathan, pp. 385. Early American Sephardic Haroset Balls with Raisins, Nuts, and Apple dating back to 1753. Ingredients: 3 cups raisins, 2 cups blanched almonds, ½ apple, ½ teaspoon cinnamon or to taste. Directions: Coarsely grind raisins and 1 ½ cups of the almonds. Add peeled and cored apple with the cinnamon. Using your hands press mixture into balls the size of large marbles. Press one of the remaining almonds into each Haroset ball. Yields: About 4 dozen balls.
- DVD, 'They Came For Good: A History of the Jews in the United, Taking Root 1820-1880', can be borrowed from the JCC HaSifira Library.
- Ingredients to make a New York Egg Cream. Ingredients: U-Bet Chocolate syrup, milk, and seltzer. (If possible it's fun to get a hold of a seltzer canisters and cartridge to make your own seltzer. This item can be found at any cooking supply store.) Ratio per cup 2 tsp. chocolate syrup and 1 ounce of milk at the bottom of a cup and fill with seltzer.

### Procedure

- We began class by making the connection between the first Jewish community and the Jewish community in the 1800-1900's. We recalled that at the last class



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- we learned that the parade that celebrated American Independence from British rule, the American Revolutionary War of 1776, had a separate table that held foods that were kosher so that the Jewish community could be equal participants in celebrating American new found independence. We then explored the Jewish Cooking in America book by Joan Nathan and found a recipe that dated back to 1753 a Sephardic Haroset Balls recipe. (Activity # 1) We duplicated this recipe and symbolically celebrated not only American Independence but the independence of the Jewish community.....estimated time allotted...20min
- While we ate Haroset Balls we viewed an excerpt from, (Activity #2) They Came for Good: A History of the Jews in the United States, Taking Root 1820-1880. The focus questions to viewing this excerpt were: What contributions did central European Jews make to the American Economy and society? What impact did the new immigrants have on Jewish community life in the United States? .....estimated time allotted.....20 minutes
  - After viewing the DVD the students were asked to brainstorm a list of items that the new immigrants contributed to the society. [i.e.: foods, customs, inventions, nuances, and language].....estimated time allotted.....20 minutes
  - Students realized that much of these societal contributions were contributed by the German Jewish immigrants. From that point of view we examined excerpts from the parody book, Yiddish with Dick and Jane. While reading out loud excerpts from this book we made a list of Yiddish words that typically are used in American society by Jews and Non-Jews. The list included the following words: mensch, schlock, schlep, nosh, oy, plotz, schmooze, and meshugge. ....estimated time allotted.....20 minutes
  - We then learned that with the German and Russian immigrants many new foods were introduced into American society. The bagel and the knish just to name a couple. We then ended our class by duplicating a recipe for an 'Ekt Keem' which is a Yiddish phrase that means 'pure sweetness' but is better known today as an 'Egg Cream' which has neither egg nor cream. It was developed by a German Jew, Louis Auster, 1890. He was a candy/soda shop owner in Brooklyn, New York. The recipe utilized milk, chocolate syrup (to make it authentic use U-Bet syrup), and seltzer water. Seltzer which was dispensed through a pump bottle was carbonated water first manufactured by a European Jew, Jacob Schwebbes. (We even made our own seltzer.) It was a fun way to end our class as it demonstrated some of the inventions, customs, and nuances that the European Jews introduced into American Society. ...estimated time allotted.....20 minutes

### Questions to consider



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1. Once the Jewish community became established how did it affect the community at large?
2. What was the make-up of the Jewish community by the late 1800's? (Sephardic or Ashkenazi)
3. Can you name some of the inventions, conventions, foods, words that have been introduced into American society by the Jewish community?
4. How did the German Jewish immigrants change the Jewish community by the introduction of Reform and Conservative movements?
5. What are examples of how the Jewish community affects the community at large still today?

### Comments and Feedback

This second lesson concludes the unit on the History of the American Jewish community. It helps students to see the growth of the community within the Jewish sect as well as the affects that the Jewish community had on the larger community. The Jewish community, influenced by this new wave of European immigrants introduced many social reforms, religious reforms, inventions, conventions, nuances, foods, and language into the American populace. They were also an integral part of the economic growth of America. Once again as an American Jew we must take pride in our history as both a Jew and an American.

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