

Resources for Teaching Jewish American History

Ellie Gettinger, Director of Outreach, Jewish Theological Seminary, Independent Museum Consultant

Jewish history is intertwined with text. There is a pivotal moment in the **Torah**, when God gives the Torah to his people through Moses (my five-year-old daughter was amazed by this meta moment, the Torah is given in the Torah!), establishing the centrality of the written word in Jewish life and history. Jewish people are often called “the people of the book.” While some feel this refers to the relationship between Jews and the Torah, there is also a sense that this means that the whole body of Jewish text that is written, compiled, and commented upon over millennia.¹

Let's begin with the concept of the **Talmud**. The Talmud was compiled based on earlier texts from the second to fifth centuries CE. It evolved in the Jewish communities in Jerusalem and Babylon, after the destruction of the Second Temple and the dispersion of the Jewish people. The Talmud is built on the tradition that when Moses received the Torah at Mount Sinai, he also received the oral law along with the written law. After the destruction of the Second Temple, which fundamentally changed the practice of Jewish ritual life, study of the Torah became central to the Jewish people. The oral law was written down in what is called the **Mishnah**; the Talmud is an explanation, argument, and expansion of the Mishnah codified over centuries.

Looking at a page of the Talmud provides a framework for a resource guide. In the center of this page is the entire Talmud. The areas around the center include post-Talmudic commentaries by **rabbis**, explaining their sense of this particular law or story. It was compiled over centuries so in looking at a page of the Talmud, you are actually observing centuries of argument and evaluation. The textual tradition within Judaism is additive. People have called the Talmud the first hypertext book because of its construction with text referencing other text, pulling in tangential stories, and then providing “links” to broader conclusions.



A color-coded page of the Talmud shows the central text surrounded by layers of commentary. Each section is highlighted in a different color to help readers navigate the traditional layout and understand nearly 2,000 years of Jewish study and interpretation.²

¹ Be sure to reference the glossary of the volume to learn more about any bolded terms you are unfamiliar with; for more insight about teaching Jewish American History, especially as it pertains to Jewish religious practices, see the article by Yehudah Potok, also in this volume.

² To learn more about this image visit sas.upenn.edu/~jtreat/rs/002/Judaism/talmud.html.

National History Day® (NHD) projects have a lot in common with a page of Talmud. They start with a specific story or historical moment. Then, using primary and secondary sources, students provide the commentary to make this topic more relevant, understandable, or known. As a whole, each year students all over the world are part of a tradition of building arguments to create a narrative that puts sources at the center.

This resource guide is based on the following assumptions:

- › History is additive, with new historians building on previous knowledge to create a more complex and nuanced narrative;
- › Understanding any historical element requires considering multiple perspectives;
- › The guide will emphasize changes across time and place; and
- › History is a constantly evolving process, in which historians and educators share their interpretations of sources and students engage with those sources, uncovering new meanings and discovering fresh ways to connect with the past.

GENERAL RESOURCES

These repositories offer a variety of primary sources over a broader period of Jewish and Jewish American history and can be useful for almost any historical period.

American Jewish Archives | americanjewisharchives.org/

American Jewish Archives (AJA) is a division of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR). It was established to collect, preserve, and make available for research, materials on the history of Jews and Jewish communities in the Western Hemisphere.

Center for Jewish History | cjh.org/

The Center for Jewish History is a centrally located collection of reputable Jewish repositories and resources in New York City. Partners of the Center for Jewish History (CJH) include:

- › American Jewish Historical Society (AJHS)
- › American Sephardi Federation (ASF)
- › Leo Baeck Institute (LBI)
- › Yeshiva University Museum (YU Museum)
- › YIVO Institute for Jewish Research (YIVO)

Find out more about the partner institutions and links to their resources by visiting cjh.org/about/our-partners#asf

Jewish Telegraphic Agency Archives | jta.org/archive

Since its founding in 1917, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Archives (JTA) has earned a reputation for journalistic integrity, outstanding reporting, and insightful analysis. This searchable archive includes in-depth articles about important issues in Jewish history (like the **Holocaust**, the establishment of Israel, and the Civil Rights Movement) that have been covered by the Jewish press.

Jewish Women's Archive | jwa.org

The Jewish Women's Archive (JWA) is dedicated to expanding and transforming the historical narrative by restoring Jewish women and those assigned female at birth to their rightful place in the story. This online archive includes an encyclopedia, digital collections, lesson plans, and oral histories reflecting the roles that women play in Jewish life and history.

National Library of Israel | education-en.nli.org.il/teaching-resources?jewish-calendar=israel#cards

A collection of lesson plans about Israeli history through primary sources held by the National Library of Israel.

Weitzman National Museum of Jewish History (Core Exhibition and Virtual Tour) | theweitzman.org/coreexhibition/

Beginning in the 1600s when the first permanent Jewish settlers came to the New World from Brazil, the Weitzman National Museum of Jewish History's core exhibition flows chronologically as it highlights the diverse backgrounds, expectations, and experiences of Jews who first came to what became the United States and the generations that followed. The exhibition illustrates the choices they faced, the challenges they confronted, and the ways in which they shaped, and were shaped by, their American home.

JEWISH RELIGION AND LIFE

Judaism is rooted in thousands of years of history and practice. When it comes to understanding Jewish religious observance and cultural practices, the challenge in sharing resources is there is a spectrum of interpretation and practice.

My Jewish Learning | myjewishlearning.com

This resource is a great way to learn about Jewish holidays and ideas. While this website is written with a Jewish audience in mind, it provides helpful articles about many aspects of Jewish life, from holidays to dietary laws and lifecycle. Each section begins with an introductory article that provides background on a specific topic. The “Eat” section, in particular, features delicious recipes—a reflection of food’s central role in Jewish life.

Expanding our Understanding of Jewish Identity, Facing History & Ourselves | facinghistory.org/ideas-week/expanding-our-understanding-jewish-identity

Facing History & Ourselves resources explore how expanding narratives of Jewish identity fights antisemitism and honors the vibrancy of Jewish life.

HUC-JIR Jewish Language Project | jewishlanguages.org

This digital humanities project works to promote research on, awareness about, and engagement surrounding the many languages spoken and written by Jews throughout history and around the world. It includes information about over 30 languages and provides curriculum ideas.

GLOBAL JEWISH HISTORY

Centropa | centropa.org/en/our-archive-library-rescued-memories

Centropa was founded in Vienna and Budapest in 2000 with the goal of preserving Jewish memory in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Baltics, and the former Soviet Union. The Centropa archive includes thousands of photographs and oral histories that can be sorted by tags and geographies.

Diarna (Mapping Jewish Life in the Middle East) | diarna.org/about/intro/

Diarna (אָנָרָאִיד “our homes” in Judeo-Arabic), the Geo-Museum of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Life, is digitally preserving the physical remnants of Jewish history throughout the region, capturing site data and recording place-based oral histories before the memories of these communities are lost.

Leo Baeck Institute | lbi.org/catalog/

The institute is a research library and archive focused on the history of German-speaking Jews. Its extensive library, archival, and art collections comprise one of the most significant repositories of primary source material and scholarship on the centuries of Jewish life in Central Europe before the Holocaust.

Light and Shadows: The History of Iranian Jews, Fowler Museum at UCLA | fowler.ucla.edu/curriculum-resource-light-and-shadow-the-story-of-iranian-jews/

This curriculum offers an avenue for exploring the 3,000-year history of Iranian Jews. There is a PowerPoint that includes original objects and pictures to illustrate the lengthy history of Jews in Iran.

Mizrahi Stories | mizrahistories.com

Short articles and timelines detail the history of Jewish communities throughout the Middle East.

Sephardic Journeys, The American Sephardi Federation | americansephardi.org/exhibitions/sephardic-journeys/

Sephardim were driven—sometimes by choice, too frequently by force—to transcend borders and barriers. The following rare books and artifacts, from the collection of The American Sephardi Federation, reflect a rich scholarly tradition and invite reflection upon the physical, emotional, and spiritual journeys of Jewish history.

The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe | encyclopedia.yivo.org

This encyclopedia provides the most complete picture of the history and culture of Jews in Eastern Europe from the beginnings of their settlement in the region to the present. The resource makes accurate, reliable, scholarly information about East European Jewish life accessible to everyone.

AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY

American Foodways: The Jewish Contribution |

apps.lib.umich.edu/online-exhibits/exhibits/show/jewishfoodways

This exhibition highlights the Jewish contributions to and experience in American culinary history. Using material from the Janice Bluestein Longone Culinary Archive at the University of Michigan Library, Special Collections Library, it is a window into one experience of American foodways.

From Haven to Home: 350 Years of Jewish Life in America | loc.gov/exhibits/haventohome/

From Haven to Home is a Library of Congress online exhibition marking 350 years of Jewish life in America. The exhibition features more than 200 treasures from the collections of the Library of Congress. Organized chronologically, the exhibit offers an introduction to each time period and provides grounding narratives for primary sources.

EARLY AMERICAN LIFE

The first Jews arrived in New Amsterdam from Recife, Brazil in 1654. Recife had been a Dutch colony, but once the Portuguese government took over, the Jews of Recife were expelled. The Jewish community remained small in the colonies and after the creation of the United States and the majority of these early Jewish settlers were Sephardi.

A Portion of the People: Three Hundred Years of Southern Jewish Life | apop.library.cofc.edu/

This online exhibition is the tale of people who, in the beginning, had to cope with nearly unlimited freedom in a society where more than half the population was held in slavery. The story demonstrates the resilience of Jewish culture over the centuries and the intriguing mix of southern ways and Jewish traditions that characterizes a small but significant portion of the people.

Touro Synagogue | tourosynagogue.org

One of the earliest **synagogues** in the United States, the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, was founded by Sephardi Jews who were attracted to the religious tolerance of this colony.

THE CIVIL WAR

The Shapell Roster of Jewish Service in the American Civil War | shapell.org/roster/

The Shapell Roster is a research project and digital database that documents Jewish soldiers who served in the American Civil War, both Union and Confederate. It provides biographical details, military records, and historical context to highlight the contributions of Jewish Americans during the conflict. Within the website, you can browse digital exhibitions and explore educator resources.

Ulysses S. Grant and General Orders No. 11 |

nps.gov/articles/000/ulysses-s-grant-and-general-orders-no-11.htm

This article from the National Park Service offers insight into General Grant's Order Number 11, which expelled all Jews from his military district, blaming them for wartime trade violations. The order was quickly revoked by President Abraham Lincoln after public outcry.

MASS MIGRATION

Digital Public Library of America | dp.la

Compiling primary sources into both exhibits and sets, this site offers a portal into library collections throughout the U.S. For those seeking background on the immigration of Jews to the United States, the library offers primary source sets on immigration from 1880 to 1930 (dp.la/primary-source-sets/immigration-and-americanization-1880-1930) and a curated list of materials (dp.la/browse-by-topic/immigration-since-1840/immigration-quotas-1920-1939) related to immigration **quotas** in the 1920s and 30s.

The Statue of Liberty - Ellis Island Foundation |

statueofliberty.org/discover/passenger-ship-search/

During the largest human migration in modern history, Ellis Island processed more immigrants than all other North American ports combined. Today, tens of millions of Americans can trace at least one ancestor to Ellis. The Passenger Search database allows users to look for family members who arrived at the Port of New York from 1820 to 1957.

America, Museum of Family History | museumoffamilyhistory.com/landsmanshaftn.htm

The Museum of Family History is a virtual, multimedia, and interactive creation that was designed to explore modern Jewish history. This particular exhibit highlights the history of **landsmanshaft** (plural: *landsmanshaftn*), the Jewish aid or benefit society, formed by immigrants who were from the same town or region. The society provided needed support for new Jewish immigrants in the U.S. during the major wave of Jewish immigration from the 1880s to 1920s.

Tenement Museum | tenement.org/digital-exhibits/

The Tenement Museum welcomes visitors into the homes of immigrant, **migrant**, and refugee families to inspire connections between past and present. The museum's digital exhibit and lesson plans sections provide insight into constructing historical stories using census data and primary sources to create microhistories.

WORLD WAR I

Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) Archives | archives.jdc.org/about-us/

With records of activity in over 90 countries dating from 1914 to the present, the JDC Archives is an extraordinary and unique treasure in the archival world. The archives are located in two centers, one at JDC's New York City headquarters and the second in Jerusalem.

WORLD WAR II AND THE HOLOCAUST

Americans and the Holocaust, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum | exhibitions.ushmm.org/americans-and-the-holocaust/main

This online exhibit examines the motives, pressures, and fears that shaped Americans' responses to Nazism, war, and genocide.

History Unfolded: US Newspapers and the Holocaust | newspapers.ushmm.org

This database contains data drawn from over 50,000 newspaper articles published between 1933 and 1946. The resource sheds light on what information about the Holocaust was available to people throughout the United States during this time period.

National World War II Museum | nationalww2museum.org

This dynamic educational resource serves the needs of teachers and students from grade school through the post-graduate level. The museum also highlights educational resources for teachers and students that can be used to explore the tragedy of the Holocaust.

Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation | vha.usc.edu/home

This archive contains more than 55,000 video testimonies of survivors and witnesses of genocide, crimes against humanity, and related persecution.

Yad Vashem | yadvashem.org/

Yad Vashem is the Holocaust Memorial Museum of Israel. Its online database includes the Central Names Database of Victims of the Shoah, stories of rescuers, a photograph archive, and survivor testimony.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

A Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit | sepharditoolkit.org/

A collection of recommendations, strategies, and resources to help educators learn about Sephardi and Mizrahi heritage and shape inclusive school environments.

Antisemitism Resource Collection, Facing History & Ourselves |
facinghistory.org/resource-library/antisemitism-resource-collection

These resources help educators establish a brave, inclusive, and reflective classroom community as they explore this challenging topic. The resources are organized thematically and include lesson plans, teaching strategies, videos, and webinars.

Echoes & Reflections |echoesandreflections.org/teach/

This resource offers guides and tools to prepare for classroom instruction about the Holocaust.

Jewish American Heritage Month Educator Resources |
jewishamericanheritage.org/educator-resources/

This compilation of educational materials explores Jewish American history and provides resources from a variety of platforms, including museums and archives, curriculum developers, and nonprofit groups.

Teaching Materials on Antisemitism and Racism, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum |
ushmm.org/teach/teaching-materials/antisemitism-racism

This lesson focuses on the history of antisemitism and its role in the Holocaust to better understand how prejudice and hate speech can contribute to violence, mass atrocity, and genocide.

The Jewish Americans, PBS |pbs.org/jewishamericans/

This documentary explores 350 years of Jewish American history. It is about the struggle of a tiny minority who make their way into the American mainstream while, at the same time, maintaining a sense of their own identity as Jews. The “For Educators” section of the website offers lesson plans and resources.