

Teaching the Jewish Experience in a Secular Classroom: Its Challenges and Solutions

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At its core, teaching history in the classroom goes beyond the recounting of names, dates, and events. It seeks to impart empathy and create a deeper understanding of ourselves and those around us, within and beyond the classroom. It also provides perhaps the greatest venue to foster civic agency and instill moral and ethical lessons that resonate with students, encouraging them to reflect on the consequences of human choices and actions. This depth of understanding is especially important when it comes to teaching about minoritized communities, whose histories and identities are often misunderstood, if not overlooked entirely. The narratives and histories of these communities are often constructed by those in power rather than by the members of those communities.

Teaching Jewish and Jewish American history in the secular classroom embodies this challenge, as it requires educators to carefully balance the separation of church and state with the need to educate students about the complexities of Jewish identity and Jewish people's historical contributions to our world. If not careful, schools can create a culture that discourages expressions of faith and religious identity, thereby establishing an unwelcome or alienating environment for students.¹

Another difficulty when including Jewish history in the classroom is the tendency to teach about and then view Jewish identity only through the lens of the **Holocaust**. When presented in this way, Jewish historical subjects often become the embodiment of victimhood, rather than a complex group of diverse peoples with a long history that has continued to evolve and exist.² Just as educators now acknowledge that teaching African American culture only through the Atlantic slave trade is insufficient to address that complex history, we should similarly refrain from minimizing Jewish historical context to one single and traumatic series of events.

This article explores the challenges inherent in teaching about Judaism and Jewish identity within secular classrooms. It offers insights into the complexities of Jewish identity, discusses how an inclusive understanding of what it means to be Jewish can serve as an essential tool in integrating Jewish religious and historical topics, and presents strategies for educators to foster an inclusive, nuanced approach to teaching Jewish history.

¹ For more information about religious diversity in the public education setting, see the brief by David R. Brockman titled "Keep Religious Diversity in Public Education" from Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy: bakerinstitute.org/research/keep-religious-diversity-public-education.

² For more information, see the opinion piece written by Rabbi Yehudah Potok titled "How Jewish Identity is Formed Matters"; and Dara Horn, "Is Holocaust Education Making Anti-Semitism Worse?" from the April 2023 issue of *The Atlantic*.

TEACHING THE HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN SECULAR CLASSROOMS

It is a complex task to teach the history of a religious group within a secular classroom. Educators must foster an understanding of religious diversity (an important component of teaching about history and culture) while also avoiding any impression of promoting specific beliefs. The principle of separation of church and state, enshrined in the First Amendment, has shaped how religion is approached in public education.³ While this constitutional protection is meant to prevent religious bias and the establishment of a state-sponsored religion, it offers no guidance on how to treat the history of a religious group within the classroom and places that burden on the educator, leaving the door open for various interpretations and practices.

Educators need to emphasize the need for neutrality when discussing religion in classroom settings.⁴ One of the motivations for keeping religious historical topics out of the classroom has been the fear of indoctrination, or the notion that the mere teaching of such topics might lead to religious practices in schools being imposed on students. In teaching historically about religious groups, educators need to prioritize understanding, not advocacy.⁵ When teaching about religious identity is ignored or intentionally avoided, it can leave a void of ignorance. With ignorance comes stereotyping, which often leads to othering people who are different from us.

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) wrote, “religious literacy is essential for understanding the role of religion in public life, negotiating differences in the public square, and forging public policies that serve the common good . . . Only through learning about religions and beliefs will young people be adequately prepared for citizenship in a religiously diverse society and world.” NCSS emphasizes that there is an essential difference between the teaching of religion and teaching *about* religion, and “preparation for citizenship in a religiously diverse country and world requires religious literacy.”⁶

Teaching about Judaism and Jewish identity presents unique challenges but is critical. Jewish identity encompasses religious, ethnic, and cultural dimensions, making it difficult to classify Judaism as strictly a religion in the same way as Christianity or Islam. Understanding what it means to be Jewish requires more than simply studying religious beliefs and practices. It involves examining a broader civilization, shaped by shared language, customs, values, and a deep historical connection to Jewish communities worldwide.⁷ This understanding is crucial for students to grasp the nuances of Jewish identity. Reducing Jewish history to a purely religious narrative risks reinforcing potentially harmful stereotypes. Failing to capture the multidimensional nature of Jewish identity does a disservice to Jewish Americans and the purpose of a well-rounded historical education.⁸

³ The National Park Service provides a helpful article on the history of separation of church and state at [nps.gov/articles/000/church_state_historical.htm](https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/church_state_historical.htm).

⁴ Helen Rose Ebaugh, Ed., *Handbook of Religion and Social Institutions*, ed. (Springer US, 2006).

⁵ Diane L. Moore, *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁶ “Study about Religions in the Social Studies Curriculum,” *Social Education* 78 (no.4): 202-204. https://www.socialstudies.org/system/files/publications/articles/se_7804202.pdf.

⁷ Jonathan Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (Yale University Press, 2019).

⁸ For an example of work to expand what was once a one-dimensional narrative of Jewish history, see the opinion piece written by David Rhodes in *eJewishPhilanthropy* from March 12, 2025, titled “The History We Tell: Raising Up Silenced Voices in Historical Narratives.”

As a result, teaching Jewish and Jewish American history in a classroom requires a nuanced approach. Jews are an ethnoreligious group, meaning they share common cultural and ethnic backgrounds as well as religious beliefs and practices. Jewish identity can vary greatly from person to person, depending on factors such as ancestry, religious observance, cultural practices, and geographic origin. For some, being Jewish is primarily about practicing a religion; for others, it is about belonging to a cultural and historical community.

EXPANSIVE TEACHING STRATEGIES

The profound diversity within and across Jewish communities can create misunderstandings among non-Jews and sometimes even among Jews themselves, leading to overly-simplified views of what it means to be Jewish. This has been the cause of not only misunderstanding but perpetuation of **antisemitic** tropes and myths.⁹ Educators can address and combat this and teach about Jewish religion, history, and culture by analyzing primary sources, prioritizing first person narratives, incorporating interdisciplinary approaches, and getting comfortable with discomfort.

ANALYZING PRIMARY SOURCES

Historians are acutely aware of the power of letting history speak from primary sources. Using primary sources allows students to engage directly with Jewish individuals, institutions, and culture across different time periods, fostering a deeper and more personal understanding of history. Sources such as letters, institutional records, photographs, newspaper articles, and objects help students analyze historical events in context, develop critical thinking skills, and recognize the agency of Jewish communities. By incorporating primary sources, educators can highlight not only struggles but also joy, resilience, and cultural contributions. This ensures that Jewish American history is not framed solely through narratives of persecution but as a rich story of perseverance and achievement.

This World War I poster, published by the United States Food Administration, appeals in **Yiddish** to the patriotic spirit and gratitude of the new arrivals to America. Its message reads, “Food Will Win the War! You came here seeking freedom, now you must help to preserve it. We must provide the Allies with wheat. Let Nothing Go To Waste!” Versions of this poster were also published in English and Italian. Library of Congress (2002720472).



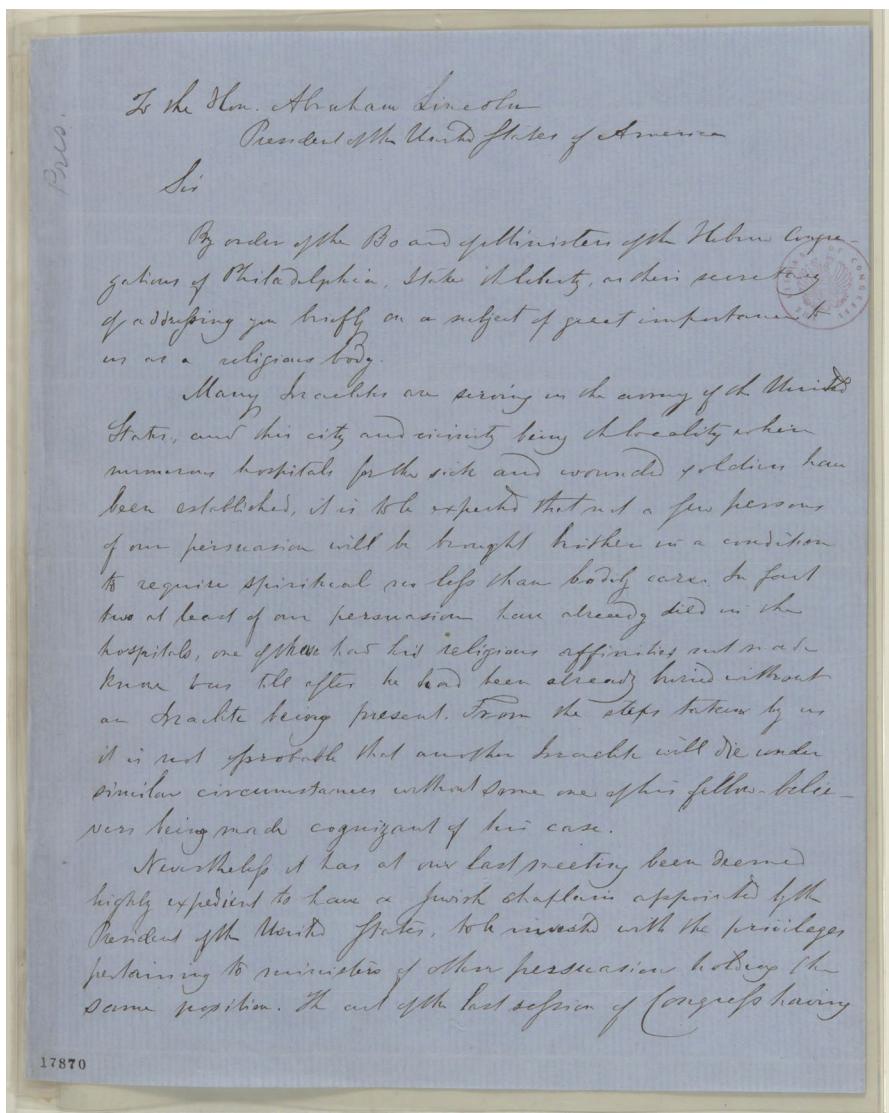
⁹ See the article on antisemitism by Miriam Eve Mora in this volume.

PRIORITIZING FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVES

Another effective strategy for promoting this expansive approach is the use of first-person narratives. Focused on individuals and communities, first-person narratives provide insight into lived experience and engage students with emotional connections. These sources allow students to engage with history on a more personal level, fostering empathy, learning about Jewish experiences in an authentic and nuanced way, and aiding in challenging stereotypes.¹⁰

IMPLEMENTING INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACHES

In addition to first-person narratives and other primary sources, educators can use interdisciplinary approaches that integrate food, art, literature, music, and film to convey the breadth and depth of Jewish culture. Studying Jewish American writers, artists, or filmmakers can help students appreciate the contributions of Jewish Americans to U.S. cultural life while highlighting the diversity within Jewish communities.



In his capacity as Secretary of the Board of Ministers of the Hebrew Congregations of Philadelphia, Isaac Leeser wrote to President Lincoln on August 21, 1862, asking that a Jewish chaplain be appointed to minister to the spiritual needs of sick or wounded Jewish soldiers in military hospitals in Philadelphia and its vicinity. The letter was referred by the president to the surgeon general who advised that, "it is both legal and proper that Chaplains of the Hebrew faith be appointed in the Army." Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress (Series 1, General Correspondence, 1833-1916).

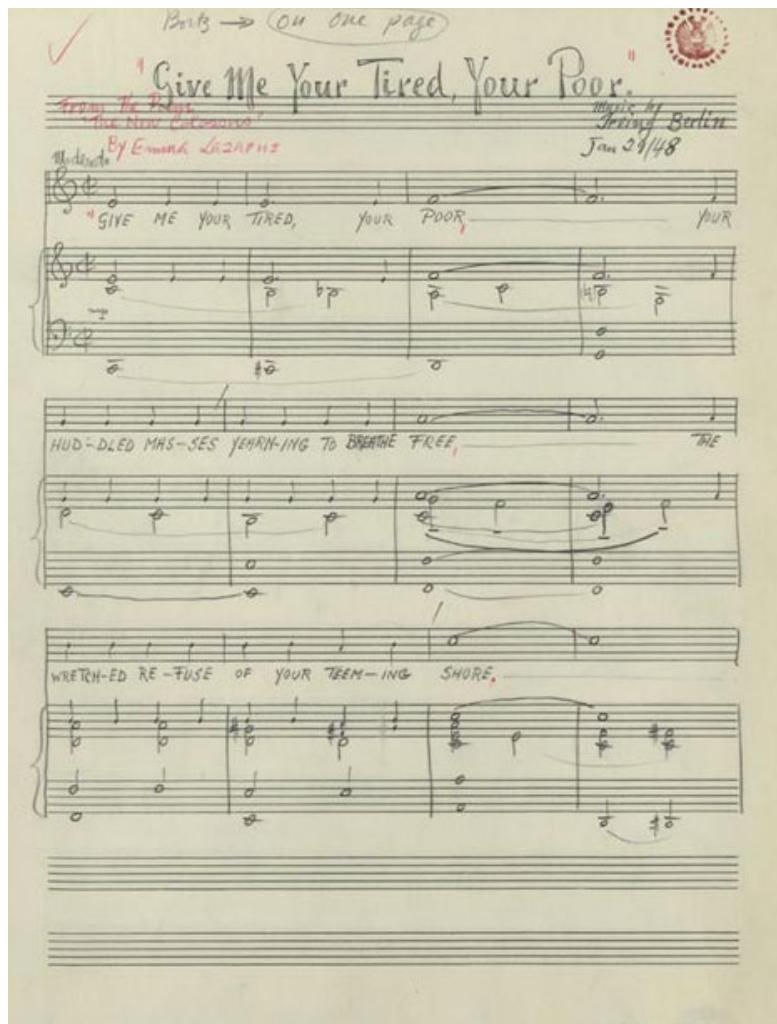
¹⁰ Linda K. Werthheimer, *Faith Ed: Teaching About Religion in an Age of Intolerance* (Beacon Press, 2015).

Similarly, teaching about Jewish holidays and customs allows students to see Jewish identity as multifaceted, extending beyond religious beliefs to include cultural traditions, histories, and lived experiences.¹¹

GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH DISCOMFORT

Teaching Jewish history may require educators to step outside their comfort zones, especially if they have limited background knowledge on the topic. Just as students are encouraged to ask questions and explore new perspectives, educators can model intellectual curiosity by embracing the role of learners alongside their students. Recognizing gaps in content knowledge is not a weakness, but an opportunity to foster open inquiry, encourage critical thinking, and create a classroom environment where questions about Jewish history, religious and cultural practices, and identity are welcomed. Resources such as professional development workshops, educator guides, and collaborations with Jewish studies scholars can provide valuable support for teachers navigating unfamiliar material.

As you teach Jewish history, you will likely have questions. When searching for answers online through Jewish organizations and sources, you will encounter a wide range of opinions, perspectives, and definitions—some of which may directly contradict one another. This diversity reflects the broad spectrum of religious, political, and scholarly viewpoints within Jewish communities. To navigate these differences, practice strong information literacy by considering the source: *does the organization presenting this information identify as religious, political, scholarly, or advocacy-based?* Understanding the perspective of a source can help you contextualize the information and present a more nuanced view to your students.



Set in 1885, Irving Berlin's Broadway musical *Miss Liberty* centers on the dedication ceremonies of the Statue of Liberty and the hero's search for the model that posed for Bertholdi's statue. Berlin, an immigrant from Russia, set music to Emma Lazarus's iconic poem, "Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor." It is the only song in the Irving Berlin canon for which he used someone else's words. Irving Berlin (1888–1989) and Emma Lazarus (1849–1887) "Give Me Your Tired, Your Poor," from *Miss Liberty*, 1949. Irving Berlin Collection. Music Division, Library of Congress (48).

¹¹ Liz Kleinrock and Caroline Kusin Pritchard, *What Jewish Looks Like* (HarperCollins, 2024).

Encouraging them to employ skills of historical analysis and ask questions about sources fosters critical thinking and helps them engage with history, more generally, in a thoughtful and informed way.

Finally, creating an inclusive classroom environment also requires respectful dialogue along with a strong dose of earnest curiosity. Teachers should create spaces where students can openly ask questions, discuss sensitive topics, and engage in critical thinking. This requires a lot of intentional work on developing a classroom community and providing skills to engage in difficult conversations. Classrooms provided with these tools produce civically minded students who value inclusive communities that celebrate difference.

CONCLUSION

Teaching Jewish history in a secular classroom is challenging but contributes an indispensable piece of American history. This task requires a careful approach that respects the separation of church and state and also takes care to maintain the complexity of Jewish history and identities. By presenting Jewish history as an intersection of religion, culture, ethnicity, and lived experience, educators can help students appreciate the complexity of Jewish identity and the importance of combating antisemitism.

The strategies outlined here, from using primary sources to acknowledging discomfort, provide practical tools for educators seeking to create an expansive classroom. Ultimately, teaching Jewish history is not just about learning facts; it is about encouraging students to see beyond stereotypes, embrace diversity, and develop as thoughtful, informed, engaged citizens. As educators, we have a responsibility to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of history that includes all voices and experiences, ensuring that they are prepared to contribute to a more just and equitable society.