

# COMING TO AMERICA

## **TEACHER MATERIALS**

Thank you for choosing a field trip and education program with the National Museum of American Jewish History. We are sure that your experience will be both enjoyable and educational for your students. Please use these materials to help prepare your class for their field trip or outreach program, and to provide a context for the Museum lesson. In addition, there are suggested follow-up activities for you to do in the classroom after your visit. Please adapt these lessons to the appropriate grade level and ability of your class.

## **ABOUT THE MUSEUM**

Established in 1976, and situated on Philadelphia's Independence Mall, the National Museum of American Jewish History presents educational programs and experiences that preserve, explore and celebrate the history of Jews in America from the 1600s to the present day.

The Museum serves as an important resource for information about Jewish life and culture, exposing visitors to American Jewish history through its changing exhibitions and complementary programming. It also offers a wide range of public and school programs related to exhibitions. Exhibitions are interpreted through age appropriate lessons designed for elementary through high school grades.

## **A BRIEF SURVEY OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY**

By the time the first European settlers arrived in the New World, Judaism was already thousands of years old. Before reaching these shores, Jews had developed ways of living that combined an ancient yet evolving religion and the culture of the people they interacted with. America has had a profound impact on Jews and Jewish people have had a profound impact on America. Over the course of their 350 years here, generations of Jewish Americans have found different ways of being Jewish in America, different ways of reconciling their ancient heritage with their new home. The history of American Jews exemplifies important themes in American history: freedom, opportunity, and the struggle for inclusion. Learning about this history illuminates how the United States became a single nation comprised of many peoples. Students will come to understand the challenges that all immigrants faced in coming here and how they both transformed and were transformed by America.

Jewish settlement in North America is generally considered to have begun in 1654, the year a group of refugees from Recife, Brazil arrived in New Amsterdam (New York) fleeing religious persecution. From that date, Jewish settlement in the New World proceeded sporadically. By 1789, more than a century after the first groups of Jews arrived, only five Jewish communities had been established, and the Jewish population in major cities like Charles Town (Charleston), South Carolina, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, still numbered only a few hundred. Nobody knew which communities would endure, where Jews would thrive, and whether their children would explore new destinations.

During the Colonial period, Jews settled in large port cities such as Savannah, Georgia, Philadelphia, New York, and Newport, Rhode Island. These cities were major shipping and commercial centers, offering the opportunity to participate in trade. These were also areas of religious toleration. Jews were able to live an observant Jewish life, establishing religious institutions such as cemeteries and synagogues. Jews maintained contact with other Jewish communities in the New World, building social, economic, and family ties that spanned the Colonies.

By the 1800s, Jews had joined the thousands of Americans who were moving west in search of a better life and new opportunities. Famine and political upheavals in Europe contributed to a new wave of immigration to the United States, contributing to the westward migration. Jews from Germany and Central Europe were part of this influx, and Jews settled in frontier areas such as Colorado and New Mexico. They established trade routes that linked these areas to Midwest and East. Jews on the frontier were often isolated from the Jewish community. They had to either build new Jewish communities or find ways of being Jewish without the institutional structures that the older, East Coast Jewish settlement enjoyed.

The next wave of immigration came between 1880 and the 1920s primarily from Eastern and Southern Europe. In those 4 decades over 25 million immigrants arrived in the United States, more than 2 million of them were Jews. These immigrants tended to settle in ethnic enclaves, forming “Little Italy” or “Little Warsaw” neighborhoods. The Jewish immigrants of the period were no different. They formed communities where Yiddish was heard on the streets. They created synagogues, schools, theaters, and cultural institutions such as *landsmanschaftn* (associations of Jews from the same town or village in Europe). They adapted the intimate community of the Old World to American urban life. In sharp contrast to the West, where pioneer Jewish merchants created their American-Jewish identities in relative isolation, the Eastern European immigrants faced an overwhelming array of competing claims on Jewish identity: labor unions, political parties, religious groups, and American popular culture. Jews faced anti-semitism during this time and were attacked in popular literature with negative stereotypes about their honesty, loyalty, business practices, and religion. Immigrants also encountered contempt or paternalism from established German Jews, who abhorred the poverty, traditional beliefs, and foreign appearance of the newcomers.

This flood of immigration ended in the 1920s when Congress voted to severely limit the number of immigrants allowed in the US. Each country was allowed a maximum number of immigrants based on the number of nationals already here. The quota system favored immigrants from Northern and Western Europe and discriminated against groups, such as Jews, who were primarily from Eastern and Southern Europe. Asian immigration ended almost completely.

The immigration restrictions demonstrate the precarious position of minority ethnic groups in the United States. While the country provided them freedom and opportunity, there was also deep-seeded fear and mistrust on the part of the majority population. For most of its history, America has been a place open to Jews, where Jews can come and create communities and worship freely. However, not everyone has always shared that vision of America. Certain groups believed that immigrants were racially inferior and caused unemployment, poverty, and social problems. American immigration policies did not relent even in the face of the Holocaust. Jews fleeing the Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s found America’s doors closed.

Following World War II, American Jews became more assimilated into mainstream American culture. They worked at the same jobs, attended the same schools, and spoke the same language as their gentile neighbors. They joined the general migration from old urban neighborhoods to new suburbs. Outside the embrace of the traditional immigrant community that their parents or grandparents knew, Jewish couples sought to recreate communal connections in their new suburban lives. Suburbanization sparked the growth of hundreds of new

synagogues in the 1950s and 1960s. These synagogues served as community centers, providing religious schools, gyms, and social activities for young Jewish adults.

Judaism continues to shape and respond to changes in American culture. Jews, in part because of Judaism's emphasis on social justice and in part because of Jews' experiences as a marginalized minority, led many of the protest and social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In turn, feminism, environmentalism, and other social movements have influenced how many Jews practice their religion.

Today, Jews have become part of American society to an extent unimagined by the band of refugees that came here from Brazil in 1654. Even a generation ago, the idea that an Orthodox Jew could be the Democratic nominee for vice president was laughable. Joseph Lieberman's candidacy demonstrates how Jews have become part of the fabric of American politics, society, and culture. The story of Jews in America demonstrates how a handful of people seeking freedom can shape the future of a nation. That is also the story of America itself.

## **ABOUT THE EDUCATION PROGRAM**

**Your visit will be divided into three sections. A museum educator will conduct your lesson.**

1. Your class will visit historic Congregation Mikveh Israel, “Synagogue of the American Revolution,” which shares its location with the Museum. Students will learn about the Jewish community in Philadelphia during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They will also learn about Jewish rituals, symbols and worship. Students will examine “hands-on” objects and receive an introduction to the Hebrew language.
2. Your class will participate in a hands-on immigration lesson.
3. Your class will view *Molly’s Pilgrim*, a 25-minute film about a Russian girl who immigrated to America and the challenges she encounters adjusting to a new culture.

Please allow two hours of time for the full program.

## **ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS**

The educational experience at the National Museum of American Jewish History fulfills many **Performance Examples** based on the curriculum **Benchmarks**. Six of those examples are listed below:

- 1- Social Studies: Explain why individuals and groups respond differently to their physical and social environments on the basis of shared assumptions, values and beliefs.
- 2- World Language: Demonstrate knowledge of the art, music, and authentic artifacts of the target culture.
- 3- Reading: Gain knowledge of the history and experiences of cultural groups in Philadelphia and other parts of the United States.
- 4- Mathematics: Find problem solutions that reflect the experiences of diverse groups and contemporary issues.
- 5- Listening: Participate effectively in conversations and group interactions.
- 6- Viewing: Analyze, synthesize, and evaluate visual data in order to expand world views.

## **SUGGESTED CLASSROOM LESSONS**

The following lessons are designed to prepare your students for their upcoming visit. Please adapt these lessons to the appropriate grade level and abilities of your students.

### **Suggested Pre-Visit Lessons**

The following discussions will help your students understand more fully some of the issues that will be addressed during their tour.

#### **1. Immigration**

##### Objectives

- To have students think about the difficulties of immigrations
- To have students consider current questions about immigration
- To develop skills in writing and critical thinking

##### Instructions

- Writing for Thinking. Students take 10 minutes to respond in writing to the following question: “Why might someone move away from home?” The written responses can be informal—note form or a list. Complete sentences not necessary
- Have students share what they wrote with the class
- Use the writing exercise to lead into a discussion of immigration. Have students consider the following questions:
  - What is difficult about moving away from home?
  - What would be difficult about moving to another country?
  - Why do people chose to move to another country?
- Define “immigration” and “immigrant” for the students.
- Discuss the following questions with students:
  - Should there be restrictions on who is allowed to immigrate to the United States? What would the restrictions be based on?
  - Should immigrants have the same rights as native-born Americans, such as the right to vote?
  - Should immigrants be required to learn English?

## Suggested Post-Visit Lessons

These lessons are developed to further enhance the students' visit to the Museum and to reinforce the information they learned.

### 1. Immigration Poetry

#### Objectives:

- Reading skills—analyzing a poem
- Writing skills—writing a poem
- Thinking skills—comparing today's immigrant experience to that of immigrants a century ago.

#### Instructions:

- Distribute a copy of the last stanza of Emma Lazarus' "The New Colossus" to the class. Explain that it was written in 1903 by Emma Lazarus, a young Sephardic Jew. Tell the students that this poem is inscribed on the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor.

*Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!*

- Have the students look up the underlined words in the dictionary so they fully understand the meaning of the poem.
- Discuss the poem. Consider the following questions: Who do you think is narrating the poem? Who is the narrator talking to? What is the "Golden Door"? Why is that imaged used?
- Discuss how immigrants arrive today, (e.g. airplane) and some reasons why they would want to come to the US.
- Rewrite the poem to reflect an immigrant experience today. Who is narrating their poem and to whom is it speaking? Students may use the attached worksheet or they may write their poem from scratch.

# A New Colossus for a New World Classroom Activity

STUDENTS NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Fill in the blanks and create your own poem.

Give me your \_\_\_\_\_, your \_\_\_\_\_,  
(noun) (noun)

Your \_\_\_\_\_ masses \_\_\_\_\_ to  
(adjective) (verb)  
\_\_\_\_\_ free.  
(verb)

The \_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ of your \_\_\_\_\_ shore.  
(adjective) (noun) (adjective)

Send these, the \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ to me,  
(noun) (adjective)

I lift my \_\_\_\_\_ beside the \_\_\_\_\_  
(noun) (adjective)  
\_\_\_\_\_.  
(noun)

## **2. Creative Writing: Coming to America, the Sequel**

### Objectives:

- Writing skills—characterization and narrative
- Thinking skills—extrapolating from acquired knowledge

### Instructions:

Have the students write a short story about their character (mother, father, son, or daughter) from the “Coming to America” museum exercise. They should imagine what their character’s life was like one, five, or ten years after arriving to America and write a story describing a day in the character’s life. They should consider the following questions: Does the character live in an immigrant neighborhood? Has he/she learned English? Does he/she work or go to school? If so, what is his/her work or school day like? Does he/she miss home? Does he/she wish he/she had chosen differently about what to bring to America?

## **3. A Bintel Brief**

### Objectives:

- Developing reading skills—analyzing primary sources
- Developing writing skills—writing a letter, writing persuasively
- Developing thinking skills—understanding and posing a solution to an ethical problem
- Learning about immigrant work experiences

### Instructions:

Have students write an editor’s response to the “Bintel Brief” letter transcribed below from The Forward, a Jewish newspaper that was founded in 1897. The “Bintel Brief” was an advice column created in 1906 to help Eastern European immigrants learn about America and get advice as they tried to build new lives. Like “Dear Abby” today, the column featured a letter from a reader and a response from the editor. Very often the letters were not from actual readers, rather the editor made them up to create an opportunity to comment on a certain situation.

1908

*Esteemed Editor,*

*We were sitting in the shop and working when the boss came over to one of us and said, “You ruined the work: you’ll have to pay for it.” The worker answered that it wasn’t his fault, that he had given out the work in perfect condition. “You’re trying to tell me!” The boss got mad and began to shout, “I pay your wages and you answer back, you dog! I should have thrown you out of my shop long ago.”*

*The worker trembled, his face got whiter. When the boss noticed how his face paled, he gestured, spat and walked away. The worker said no more. Tired, and overcome with shame, he turned back to his work and later he exclaimed, "For six years I've been working here like a slave, and he tells me, "You dog, I'll throw you out!"*

*Obviously, the offended man felt he had done wrong in not standing up for his honor as a worker and human being. In the shop, the machines hummed, the irons thumped, and we could see the tears running down his cheeks.*

*Did this unfortunate man act correctly in remaining silent under the insults of the boss? Is the fact that he has a wife and children the reason for his slavery and refusal to defend himself? I hope you will answer my questions in the "Bintel Brief."*

*Respectfully,*  
**A.P.<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac Metzker, ed. and trans., *A Bintel Brief: Sixty Years of Letters From the Lower East Side to the Jewish Daily Forward* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 84-5.

## Selected Bibliography

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**Sacher, Howard.** A History of the Jews in America. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992

**Schoener, Alon.** The American Jewish Album: 1654 to the Present. New York: Rizzoli, 1985

### For the students:

**Fisher, Leonard.** Ellis Island: Gateway to the New World. New York: Holiday House, Inc., 1986

**Hest, Amy.** When Jessie Came Across the Sea. Cambridge: Candlewick Press 1997

**Rosenblum, Richard.** Journey to the Golden Land. Philadelphia-Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1992

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## VOCABULARY

### **Anti-Semitism**

Discriminating against and persecuting Jews.

### **Ashkenazim**

The Jews who settled in or came from Central, Northern, and Eastern Europe.

### **Assimilation**

When a minority group is absorbed into the culture of a country.

### **Community**

A group of people living together as a smaller social unit within a larger one, and having interests in common.

### **Conversos**

Spanish word meaning to convert or change a religious belief. Here, Jews who converted to Christianity during the Inquisition.

### **Holocaust**

The systematic destruction of over six million European Jews by the German Nazis during World War II.

### **Immigration**

The act of people entering a new country in order to settle there.

### **Inquisition**

In Spain in 1478, a tribunal notorious for its cruel and extreme practices against those accused of heresy. Called for Jews to convert to Christianity.

### **Isolationism**

One who opposes the involvement of his/her country in international alliances or agreements.

### **Judaism**

A religion based on the laws and teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Talmud.

### **Ladino**

A Spanish dialect with some elements of Hebrew. Spoken by Sephardic Jews in Turkey and some other Mediterranean countries.

**Marranos**

Spanish word for Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity, but secretly practiced Judaism.

**Merchant**

Someone who makes a living by trading goods and merchandise.

**Piecework**

A fixed rate paid per piece of work done, such as clothing.

**Pluralism**

The existence of groups within a nation or society distinctive in ethnic origin, cultural patterns or religion.

**Quota**

The number of people that are allowed or admitted into a country.

**Recife, Brazil**

Seaport in Northeastern Brazil on the Atlantic Ocean.

**Segregation**

Legally enforced separation of a race, class or ethnic group.

**Sephardim**

The Jews of Spain and Portugal and their descendants.

**Strike**

The action of refusing to work until certain demands are met by the employer.

**Sweatshops**

A shop where employees work long hours at low wages under poor working conditions.

**Tenements**

An apartment building divided into small apartments, often just one room, usually run-down and overcrowded.

**Union**

An association of workers to promote and protect the welfare, interest, and rights of its members, primarily by collective bargaining.

**West Indies**

Large group of islands between North America and South America.

**Yiddish**

Language derived from medieval High German spoken by Eastern European Jews and their descendants. It is written in the Hebrew alphabet and contains vocabulary borrowed from Hebrew, Russian, Polish and English.