
Sample Lesson 31: Jewish Americans: Identity, Intersectionality, and Complicating Ideas of Race

Theme: Identity

Disciplinary Area: General Ethnic Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 1, 2, 4, 5

Standards Alignment:

CA HSS Analysis Skills (9–12): Chronological and Spatial Thinking 2, 4; Historical Research, Evidence, and Point of View 2, 4; Historical Interpretation 1, 2, 3

CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy: RH.9–10.1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 10; WHST.9–10.2, 4, 7; SL.9–10.1, 2, 3, 4

CA ELD Standards: ELD.PI.9–10.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12

LESSON PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW:

This lesson examines the diversity of the Jewish American community and what unites it. Learning about Jewish diversity illustrates the concept of intersectionality, the idea that people have different overlapping identities (visible and invisible) and that the unique combination of identities shape individuals' experiences. While individual identity is personal, Jewish Americans are connected through ties of history, culture, language, religion, ancestry, celebrations, communal and familial traditions, common values, and a sense of a common ethnic peoplehood.

By examining perceptions of Jews, the lesson will address how conceptions of race and labels change over time and place (racial formation), adding another lens to the study of race. The lesson explains some of the challenging experiences of Jewish Americans, including prejudice, discrimination, antisemitism, racialization, hate crimes, Holocaust denial, and targeting by white supremacists. Jews have also experienced acculturation and assimilation, with associated benefits and losses.

Jewish Americans' many positive experiences include cultural retention through celebration of Jewish traditions, strong communities and sense of belonging, and contributions to many spheres of life. Jewish tradition and communal experiences of persecution and the Holocaust have led to a widespread commitment among Jews to pursue justice and equity for all people and a vigilance against rising antisemitism. Jews are a distinct ethnic group connected by rich traditions, thousands of years of history, ancestry, language, and religion.

Key Terms and Concepts: antisemitism, white supremacy, conditional whiteness, identity, intersectionality, racial formation, racialization, Jews of color, Mizrahi, Sephardi, Ashkenazi

Lesson Objectives (Students will be able to ...):

- Explain how identities are composed of visible and invisible attributes and are intersectional and multifaceted
- Learn about diversity within the Jewish American ethnic community
- Understand the varied intersectional identities of Jewish Americans and how Jews see themselves
- Identify the range of Jewish American experiences in relation to race and racial hierarchies over time and how Jews are seen by others

Essential Questions:

1. How do visible and invisible components make up each person's unique identity?
2. How does the concept of intersectionality help us understand Jewish American experiences?
3. How do conceptions of race change over time and place? What is racialization?
4. How does the diversity of Jewish Americans deepen our understanding of the concepts of race and ethnicity?

Lesson Steps/Activities:

Diversity of Jewish Americans: Identity and Intersectionality

1. **The Iceberg of Identity Activity** — Only a small part of an iceberg is visible above the waterline, while most of the iceberg's mass lies below the waterline and is invisible. Share an image of an iceberg or a blank copy of the Iceberg of Identity worksheet. Tell students that some parts of identity are visible to others, while other parts of identity are invisible to others.

Distribute two blank copies of the Iceberg of Identity worksheet handout.

Ask students to write on one worksheet categories of identity that are:

- Usually visible to others above the waterline, in the top third
- Sometimes visible and sometimes invisible, close to the waterline
- Usually invisible to others, in the bottom third of the iceberg

Teachers may give the option to add examples of these categories, either about a hypothetical student or about themselves. Emphasize that this is optional and there is no need to disclose private information unless they are comfortable sharing.

Refer students to the Iceberg of Identity categories list below. Suggest they add at least three visible and three invisible examples from these categories to the first Iceberg of Identity worksheet:

- a. Gender
 - b. Race
 - c. Ethnic appearance
 - d. Visible religious signs (such as head coverings, kippah, yarmulke, hijab, turban, tzitzit [Jewish ritual fringes], cross, kirpan, Star of David)
 - e. Age (for example, child, middle schooler, teen, young adult, middle age, elderly)
 - f. Body type
 - g. Ability/disability
 - h. Sexuality
 - i. Clothing (casual, formal, brands, ethnic clothing)
 - j. Language(s) (accent, second language, regional dialect, formality of speech)
 - k. Religion, level of religious practice, spirituality, philosophy
 - l. Family's national origin, immigrant, refugee, forced migration
 - m. Nationality/citizenship
 - n. Violence, trauma, or intergenerational trauma
 - o. Activity, passion, or a job that's an important part of identity
 - p. Other cultural or group or family aspect of identity
2. Explain the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality is the idea that people have different overlapping identities and that the unique combination of identities shape individuals' experiences and how a person is perceived and treated by others.
 3. Ask students to, as they watch the videos, note down on the second blank Iceberg of Identity worksheet as many aspects of identity of the speaker as they can.
 4. Watch one or two short videos:
 - a. Be'chol Lashon "Diverse Jewish Voices: Jonah" with Jonah Tobin, April 17, 2019 <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link379>
This is a three-minute video about a 13-year-old African American Jewish teen on his bar mitzvah and Jewish community.

-
- b. Elon University “Kosher/Soul: Black Jewish Identity Cooking” with Michael W. Twitty, November 11, 2015, (00:59 to 4:23)
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link380>
This is a three-minute excerpt from a one-hour video with Jewish African American food historian Michael W. Twitty, author of *The Cooking Gene*, on his intersectional identity, being a Jewish gay African American, and about Jews of color. It’s an excerpt from a video on Jewish and African American food and identity.
 5. To conclude the Iceberg of Identity activities above, ask the class to share their thoughts on how visible and invisible identities shape personal and communal identity.
 6. Ask students to read the **Fact Sheet on Jewish American Diversity**.
 7. Ask students the following questions:
 - a. In what ways is the Jewish American community diverse? (Examples include race and physical appearance, language, food and cultural traditions, religious observance, origins, and ethnic subgroup.)
 - b. What bonds all Jewish Americans together despite other cultural, racial, or ethnic differences? (Examples include shared Jewish history, values, sacred texts, religious rituals, traditions, celebrations, culture, ancestry, and sense of peoplehood.)
 8. Divide students into small groups and assign each group to read two or three short excerpts from ***I Am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl***.
 9. Questions for students on personal and communal identity in the excerpts:
 - a. Ask students to highlight or underline one key sentence or phrase in each excerpt to share with the class.
 - b. What elements of their identity does the author stress? (Examples include culture, family, ancestry, history, religion, social justice, and community.)
 - c. Why do Jewish Americans not fit neatly into racial and religious categories?
 - d. Ask students to share one word that jumps out on what being Jewish means to the writers. The teacher will compile them in a shared visual medium.

Jewish Americans and Complicating Ideas of Race

10. The teacher leads a read aloud of the **Fact Sheet on Jewish Americans and Complicating Ideas of Race**, including key word definitions on racialization, conditional whiteness, racial formation, antisemitism, and white supremacy.

-
11. Questions for students:
 - a. What is racialization? What is racial formation? What is a racial hierarchy?
 - b. When and how have Jews been racialized as nonwhite?
 - c. What is conditional whiteness?
 - d. When and how have Jews experienced conditional whiteness? Which Jews have experienced conditional whiteness? What benefits and losses might people experience when whiteness is conditional?
 - e. Why do people acculturate or assimilate? What does a member of an ethnic group gain from assimilation? What does a member of an ethnic group lose from assimilation?
 - f. How did the Holocaust shift the position of Jewish Americans in American society?
 - g. Can you determine someone's membership in a racial group based only on external appearance? Referring to the fact sheet or reflecting on your own knowledge of racial groups, what other factors go into racial identity?
 - h. Based on what we have learned about changes in how Jews as a whole have been racially categorized, what conclusions can we draw about race as a social construct?

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection:

Have students reflect and answer the following questions to conclude the lesson:

- a. Ask students to choose one aspect of their own identity and write a one-paragraph reflection on why that aspect of their identity is important to them. Please complete: "I am (choose an aspect of identity) because ... and it is important to me because ..."
- b. In what ways is the Jewish American ethnic group diverse? What bonds Jews together across this diversity?
- c. What have we learned about the changeability of racial classifications and hierarchies? How does this complicate or help us understand race more broadly?

Materials and Resources:

- Two copies of the Iceberg of Identity worksheet
- Video: Be'chol Lashon "Diverse Jewish Voices: Jonah" with Jonah Tobin, April 17, 2019, (3:08): <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link381>

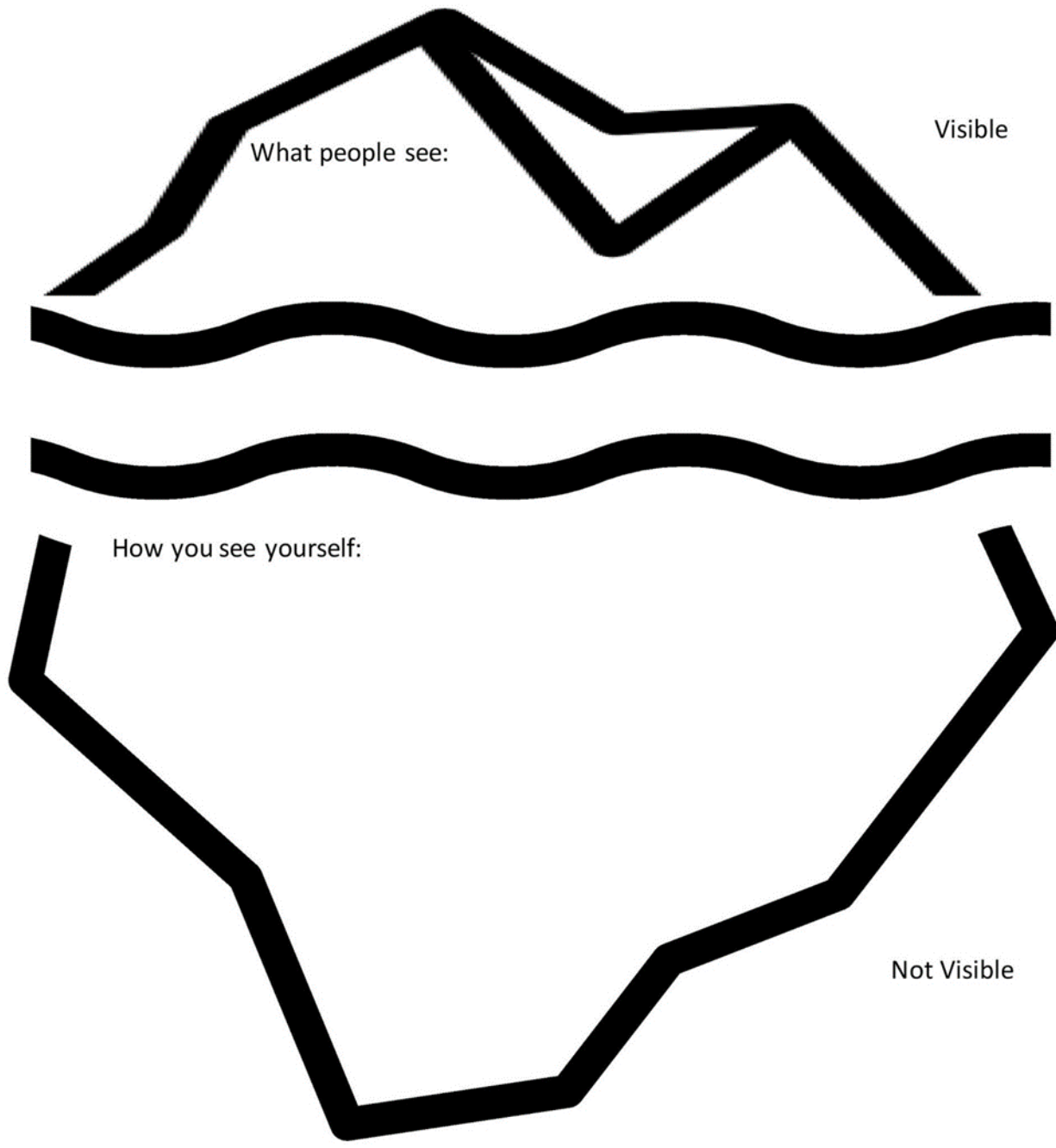
-
- Video: Elon University “Kosher/Soul: Black Jewish Identity Cooking” with Michael W. Twitty, November 11, 2015, (00:59 to 4:23): <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link382>
 - Fact Sheet on Jewish Americans and Complicating Ideas of Race
 - Excerpts from *I Am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*, edited by Judea Pearl and Ruth Pearl, Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004.
 - Handouts:
 - Fact Sheet on Jewish American Diversity
 - Fact Sheet on Jewish Americans and Complicating Ideas of Race
 - Key Word Definitions

Ethnic Studies Outcomes

Students will:

1. Recognize intersectionality and understand how it is related to identity and to systemic discrimination, racism, ethnic bigotry, discrimination, and marginalization. (Outcome 5)
2. Develop a better understanding of other people, cultures, and ethnic groups. (Outcome 4)
3. Further self-understanding by asking what ethnicity and heritage mean and to what extent identity can change over time. (Outcome 3)

The Iceberg of Identity



Fact Sheet on Jewish American Diversity

- Jewish Americans have come to the United States from all over the world and have brought a rich variety of Jewish cultural traditions with them.
- The Jewish people originated about 3,000 years ago in Southwest Asia, in the land of Israel.
- Jews do not fit neatly into predefined categories and meet the criteria for being both a religious group and an ethnic group.
- Jews are a distinct ethnic group connected by rich traditions, thousands of years of history, ancestry, language, and religion. Jewish American ethnic identity may be expressed through food, language, holidays, celebrations, expressions of peoplehood, remembrances of historical and ancestral experiences, connections to the land of Israel, a commitment to social justice, and cultural elements such as music, literature, art, and philosophy that are also part of Jewish life.
- There are several major Jewish ethnic subgroups:
 - Mizrahi Jews are racially diverse Arabic and Farsi-speaking Jews indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa for over 2,500 years.
 - Sephardic Jews are Jews who originally spoke Judeo-Spanish, or Ladino, and were expelled from Spain and Portugal to North Africa and the Ottoman Empire, beginning with their expulsion from Spain in 1492.
 - Ethiopian Jews are Amharic-speaking Jews originally from Ethiopia.
 - Ashkenazi Jews are or were Yiddish-speaking Eastern and Central European Jews.
- Major languages and literature of Jewish expression include English, Hebrew, Arabic, Yiddish, Ladino, and Farsi. Hebrew, the language of Jewish scripture, is often a lingua franca that has united different Jewish ethnic subgroups. The physical appearance of Jewish Americans is very diverse, and skin color can range from light skinned to dark skinned. Jewish Americans include Middle Eastern Jews, African American Jews, Asian American Jews, Latino/a/x Jews, and Native American Jews. Jewish families include multiracial households, and there are diverse appearances both within families and within communities.
- The majority of Jewish Americans emigrated from Eastern Europe, and while their racial appearance often reflects this, there is a range of physical appearances, reflecting the movement of Jews over time and place.
- For many Jews with light skin, Jewish identity is primary, but they may be viewed as white by others. Therefore, Jews often experience a divergence between internal identity and external classification.

-
- Other Jewish Americans or their families emigrated from the Middle East (Iran, Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Yemen), North Africa (Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco), East Africa (Ethiopia), and Central Asia (Bukharan Jews from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) and are of Mizrahi and Sephardic heritage.
 - American Judaism has a range of religious denominations, including Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative, and Orthodox, with a range of observances and practices. At the same time, Jews are united by shared sacred texts, such as the Torah, and by celebrations, traditions, and a feeling of connection to other Jews around the world.
 - American Jews have a wide range of opinions and beliefs about what it means to be Jewish and how Jewish identity is defined.
 - Across Jewish denominations, ancestry marks a person as Jewish regardless of the individual's personal level of religious observance. Traditionally, a person was considered Jewish if born to a Jewish mother. Reform Jews, among others, also consider a person with a Jewish father to be Jewish.
 - Jews consider a person without Jewish ancestry who converts to Judaism to be as Jewish as any other Jew.
 - Jews are part of the Jewish American community by birth, adoption, marriage, throwing their lot in with the Jewish people through conversion, or being part of a Jewish family.

Reflections on Jewish American Identity

Excerpts from *I Am Jewish: Personal Reflections Inspired by the Last Words of Daniel Pearl*, edited by Judea Pearl and Ruth Pearl. In memory of their son, Daniel Pearl's parents asked a diverse range of Jews to reflect on what being Jewish means to them. Daniel Pearl was an American raised in California who became a journalist for *The Wall Street Journal*. He was murdered in Pakistan by terrorists for being Jewish soon after 9/11. Pearl's last words were "My father is Jewish, my mother is Jewish, I am Jewish."

1. Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl is an Asian American rabbi ordained by Hebrew Union College. She spent her college summers working as head song leader at Camp Swig, a Reform Jewish camp in Saratoga, California.

"My father is a Jew and my mother is a Korean Buddhist. As the child of a mother who carried her own distinct ethnic and cultural traditions—and wore them on her face—I internalized the belief that I can never be 'fully Jewish' because I could never be 'purely' Jewish. My daily reminders included strangers' comments ('Funny, you don't look Jewish'), other Jews' challenges to my halakhic [Jewish law] status, and every look in the mirror.

Jewish identity is not solely a religious identification, but also a cultural and ethnic marker. While we have been a 'mixed multitude' since biblical times, over the centuries the idea of a Jewish race became popularized. After all, Jews have their own language, foods, and even genetic diseases. But what does the Jewish 'race' mean to you if you are Black and Jewish? Or Arab and Jewish? Or even German and Jewish, for that matter? How should Jewish identity be understood, given that *Am Yisrael* [people of Israel] reflects the faces of so many nations?

Years ago ... I called my mother to declare that I no longer wanted to be Jewish. I did not look Jewish, I did not carry a Jewish name, and I no longer wanted the heavy burden of having to explain and prove myself every time I entered a new Jewish community. My Buddhist mother's response was profoundly simple: 'Is that possible?' At that moment I realized I could no sooner stop being a Jew than I could stop being Korean, or female, or *me*. Judaism might not be my 'race,' but it is an internal identification as indestructible as my DNA.

Jewish identity remains a complicated and controversial issue in the Jewish community. Ultimately, Judaism cannot be about race, but must be a way of walking in this world that transcends racial lines. Only then will the 'mixed multitude' truly be *Am Yisrael*." (pages 19–20)

2. Naim Dangoor was a leader of Iraqi Jewry outside Iraq.

"When I was a young boy a teacher at school asked me, 'Why are you a Jew?' I, with all the practicality of youth, replied, 'because I was born one!'

There is, however, something in this sentiment that rings truer than one might think. Judaism is a birthright, a glorious gift from one's forefathers of faith, culture, and heritage.

For me, it is this: my strong Babylonian heritage, the heritage that Daniel Pearl also shared, his mother having been born in Baghdad, that makes me so proud to be a Jew.

Babylonia was one of the main birthplaces of the Jewish people, from where Abraham emerged as a founder, and later from where the Babylonian Talmud, forming the framework for Rabbinic Judaism, was created. Its glorious Jewish intellectual eminence fanned out across the known world for more than a thousand years. Currently, the descendants of this tradition are spread throughout the globe." (pages 97–98)

3. Julius Lester was an African American civil rights activist, writer, and professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

"It is the particular responsibility of the Jew to suffuse history with holiness. This is not something that, done once, is done for all time. It must be done every day, for every day a Jew must choose anew the responsibility of holiness.

To be holy is to be apart from, the Torah teaches us. We must be apart to possess our unique identity as a people. We must be apart to offer the world those aspects of the holy which God put into our keeping.

There is a paradox: The world needs us to be apart as Jews, though it may be loath to acknowledge it. It does not need us to be just another ethnic group. It does not need us to dissolve our particularity into an undifferentiated and colorless mass.

The world needs us to assume the difficult task of living as Jews and to do as Jews have sought to do through the ages—merge past and present and future into a Holy Now.

We do this by becoming a continuous *bracha* [blessing]—a blessing of joy that refuses to be suppressed or destroyed despite what others have said and done, despite what others say and do. To be a Jew is to be a *bracha* of laughter expressing our surprise, delight, and wonder in creation and our place in it as Jews. We are called to be a *bracha* of unending love because to be a Jew is to be in love—with a God, a people, and a land. To be a Jew is to live that love—boldly, defiantly, joyously—to become that love and live with the fluidity of a melody understood in the silence of the soul.

To be a Jew is to be a love song—to the God of our people—and to the world." (page 144)

4. Norman Lear is a writer, producer, and social activist.

"I identify with everything in life as a Jew. The Jewish contribution over the centuries to literature, art, science, theater, music, philosophy, the humanities, public policy, and the field of philanthropy awes me and fills me with pride and inspiration. As to Judaism, the religion: I love the congregation and find myself less interested in the ritual. If that

describes me to others as a ‘cultural Jew,’ I have failed myself. My description, as I feel it, would be: total Jew.” (page 34)

5. Douglas Rushkoff is a writer, journalist, and professor of media studies.

“Jews are not a tribe but an amalgamation of tribes around a single premise: that human beings have a role. Judaism dared to make human beings responsible for this realm. Instead of depending upon the gods for food and protection, we decided to enact God, ourselves, and to depend on one another.

So out of the death cults of Mitzrayim [Egypt] came a repudiation of idolatry, and a way of living that celebrated life itself. To say ‘*l’chaim*’ [to life] was new, revolutionary, even naughty. It overturned sacred truths in favor of living sacred living ...

It’s important to me that those who, throughout our history, have attacked the Jews on the basis of blood not be allowed to redefine our indescribable process or our eternally evolving civilization. We are attacked for our refusal to accept the boundaries, yet sometimes we incorporate these very attacks into our thinking and beliefs.

It was Pharaoh who first used the term *Am Yisrael* [People of Israel] in Torah, fearing a people who might replicate like bugs and not support him in a war. It was the Spanish of the Inquisition who invented the notion of Jewish blood, looking for a new reason to murder those who had converted to Catholicism. It was Hitler, via Jung, who spread the idea of a Jewish ‘genetic memory,’ capable of instilling an uncooperative nature in even those with partial Jewish ancestry. And it was Danny Pearl’s killers who defined his Judaism as a sin of birth.

I refuse these definitions.

Yes, our parents pass our Judaism on to us, but not through their race, blood, or genes—it is through their teaching, their love, and their spirit. Judaism is not bestowed; it is enacted. Judaism is not a boundary; it is the force that breaks down boundaries. And Judaism is the refusal to let anyone tell us otherwise.” (pages 90–91)

6. Senator Joe Lieberman served as a US Senator from Connecticut from 1989 to 2013 and was a vice presidential candidate in 2000.

“What does being Jewish mean to me to me? To me, being Jewish means having help in answering life’s most fundamental questions. How did I come to this place? And, now that I am here, how should I live?

My faith, which has anchored my life, begins with a joyful gratitude that there is a God who created the universe and then, because He continued to care for what He created, gave us laws and values to order and improve our lives. God also gave us a purpose and a destiny—to do justice and to protect, indeed to perfect, the human community and natural environment.

Being Jewish in America also means feeling a special love for this country, which has provided such unprecedented freedom and opportunity to the millions who have come and lived here. My parents raised me to believe that I did not have to mute my religious faith or ethnic identity to be a good American, that, on the contrary, America invites all its people to be what they are and believe what they wish ...

Jews around the world and all who love freedom—the freedom to think, to speak, to write, to question, to pray—will hold Daniel [Pearl] near to our hearts, and from his courage we will draw eternal light and strength.” (pages 107–108)

7. Senator Dianne Feinstein is the senior US Senator from California, since 1992.

“I was born during the Holocaust. If I had lived in Russia or Poland—the birthplaces of my grandparents—I probably would not be alive today, and I certainly wouldn’t have had the opportunities afforded to me here. When I think of the six million people who were murdered, and the horrors that can take hold of a society, it reinforces my commitment to social justice and progress, principles that have always been central to Jewish history and tradition.

For those of us who hold elected office, governing in this complex country can often be difficult. My experience is that bigotry and prejudice in diverse societies ultimately lead to some form of violence, and we must be constantly vigilant against this. Our Jewish culture is one that values tolerance with an enduring spirit of democracy. If I’ve learned anything from the past and from my heritage, it’s that it takes all of us who cherish beauty and humankind to be mindful and respectful of one another. Every day we’re called upon to put aside our animosities, to search together for common ground, and to settle differences before they fester and become problems.

Despite terrible events, so deeply etched in their souls, Jews continue to be taught to do their part in repairing the world. That is why I have dedicated my life to the pursuit of justice; sought equality for the underdog; and fought for the rights of every person regardless of their race, creed, color, sex, or sexual orientation, to live a safe, good life. For me that’s what it means to be a Jew, and every day I rededicate myself to that ideal.” (pages 228–229)

8. Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie is President Emeritus of the Union for Reform Judaism. He focuses on interfaith relations and social justice.

“I am Jewish. This means, above all else, that I was present at Sinai, and that when the Torah was given on that mountain, my DNA was to be found in the crowd ...

A people is usually defined by race, origin, language, territorial or statehood, and none of these categories is an obvious common denominator for the worldwide Jewish people. Peoplehood is a puzzling concept for modern Jews, particularly the younger ones, who often cannot understand what connects them to other Jews in Moscow, Buenos Aires, and

Tel Aviv. But I am convinced, to the depth of my being, that Jewish destiny is a collective destiny ... It is the covenant at Sinai that links all Jews, including nonobservant ones, in a bond of shared responsibility. And if we hope to strengthen the unity and interdependence of the Jewish people, we will have to revive the religious ideas on which these notions are based.” (pages 114–115)

9. Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg was a justice of the US Supreme Court from 1993 to 2020 and an advocate for women’s rights.

“I say who I am in certain visible signs. The command from Deuteronomy appears in artworks, in Hebrew letters, on three walls and a table in my chambers. ‘*Zedek, zedek, tirdof*,’ ‘Justice, Justice shalt thou pursue,’ these artworks proclaim; they are ever-present reminders to me of what judges must do ‘that they may thrive.’ There is also a large silver *mezuzah* [Torah verses in a small case] mounted on my door post ...

I am a judge, born, raised, and proud of being a Jew. The demand for justice runs through the entirety of Jewish history and Jewish tradition. I hope, in all the years I have the good fortune to serve on the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States, I will have the strength and courage to remain steadfast in the service of that demand.” (pages 201–202)

10. Kerri Strug is an Olympic Gold medalist in gymnastics.

“I have heard the same question over and over since I received my gold medal in gymnastics on the Olympic podium. ‘You’re Jewish?’ people ask in a surprised tone. Perhaps it is my appearance or the stereotype that Jews and sports don’t mix that makes my Jewish heritage so unexpected. I think about the attributes that helped me reach that podium: perseverance when faced with pain, years of patience and hope in an uncertain future, and a belief and devotion to something greater than myself. It makes it hard for me to believe that I did not look Jewish up there on the podium. In my mind, those are attributes that have defined Jews throughout history.” (page 98)

11. Sarah Rosenbaum is fifteen years old and from Southern California.

“When I say that I am Jewish, I am identifying myself as part of a tradition, connected to our foremothers and fathers, and carrying on to the future a culture, a religion, a way of life. I feel pride, and am overwhelmed with joy when I declare that I am part of this incredible people, our people Israel.” (page 54)

Fact Sheet on Jewish Americans and Complicating Ideas of Race

- The first Jews to arrive in 1654 to what became the United States were Sephardic Portuguese Jews from Brazil, who fled the Portuguese expulsion and inquisition.
- In US immigration and naturalization law from 1898 to 1941, Jews were categorized as part of the “Hebrew race.” This racialization deemed Jews as nonwhite.
- A large wave of Jewish immigrants came to the US from Eastern Europe between 1880 and 1924. White supremacist prejudice against Jews and Catholics from Eastern and Southern Europe motivated the passing of the Johnson–Reed Immigration Act of 1924, greatly restricting Jewish immigration through 1965.
- In addition to targeting African Americans, the white supremacist racism of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) deemed Jews as nonwhite, a separate and lesser race that was a threat to American “racial purity,” and targeted Jews, such as with exclusionary immigration legislation and intimidation in large marches in Washington, DC.
- For the first half of the twentieth century, Jews were usually not considered white in the US racial formation.
- From the 1880s through the 1960s, antisemitic employment discrimination with overt and covert “no Jews allowed” notices often led Jews to enter new industries with less discrimination. Housing covenants prohibited Jews or “Hebrews” from purchasing houses in many areas. Elite universities also had quotas until the early 1960s limiting the number of Jews who could attend them.
- In the 1920s and 1930s, anti-Jewish conspiracy theories (later used in Nazi propaganda) were openly distributed in the US, for example by Henry Ford’s newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, and Father Edward Coughlin’s radio show.
- Drawing upon white supremacist ideas about Jews and pseudoscientific eugenics “theories,” Nazi racial theories deemed Jews a separate nonwhite race (racialization), and the lowest race in their racial hierarchy, leading to the genocide of the Holocaust.
- In the 1930s, growing anti-Jewish prejudice in the US led to the US government’s refusal of entry to Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany until 1944 after millions were already murdered.
- Jews often changed Jewish-sounding names to avoid discrimination, to assimilate, or for reasons of internalized oppression. Starting with immigrants, and common with actors, this practice of name changing continues to the present day.
- In the decades after the Holocaust, American attitudes toward Jews gradually changed, and overt anti-Jewish discrimination decreased. Descendants of light-

skinned Jewish immigrants were able to acculturate or assimilate, which brought gains and losses.

- Acculturation refers to the adoption of many of the practices and values of the majority or dominant culture while still retaining a connection to one's culture of origin, or a balance between cultures.
- Assimilation is a process by which a minority group or culture comes to resemble that of the majority culture.
- Assimilation allowed the children of Jewish immigrants to change their position on the racial hierarchy from that of their immigrant parents, though they remained vulnerable to antisemitism. Assimilation also brought loss of community, identity, and cultural traditions and practices.
- While anti-Jewish prejudice became less socially accepted over time, antisemitism persisted and persists in various forms today.
- White supremacists continue to racialize Jews as nonwhite. This was evident when participants at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville chanted "the Jews will not replace us," with "us" referring to white Americans. See <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link383>.
- Jewish institutions continue to be targets of hate crimes, including synagogue shootings in Poway, California, in 2019, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 2018.
- In different contexts, an individual may have very different experiences.
 - Light-skinned Jews may experience the benefits of conditional whiteness on the basis of their appearance, for example, safer encounters with law enforcement, but also experience antisemitic prejudice and discrimination on the basis of their Jewishness from both extremes of the political spectrum.
 - Jews of color, like all communities of color, face systemic racism and also face antisemitic prejudice and discrimination on the basis of their Jewishness.
- Jews of all skin colors who are visibly Jewish, from their appearance, name, self-identification, or religious clothing or symbols, such as a Star of David necklace, experience more overt antisemitism.

Key Word Definitions

racialization: When a group becomes categorized as a stigmatized group, and that group is seen as a separate race by another dominant group.¹⁹

conditional whiteness: When a person or group can gain the benefits of whiteness by dropping ethnic markers of difference or assertions of belonging to a separate group. The word “conditional” is significant as whiteness may be bestowed on light-skinned members of a community (Jewish, Arab, Latina/o/x, or Native American, for example) on the condition that individuals assimilate and lose their religious or ethnic distinctiveness.

racial formation: Racial formation is the combination of 1) a socially constructed system of racial definitions and 2) hierarchies that can vary and change in different times and places. Assignment to racial categories can change over time and place, and a group can become racialized.²⁰

antisemitism: Hatred, discrimination, fear, and prejudice against Jews based on stereotypes and myths.

white supremacy: The belief that white people are a superior race and should dominate society. White supremacists target other racial and ethnic groups, such as African Americans and Jews, who they view as inferior.²¹

19 See: Daniel Martinez HoSang and Oneka LaBennett. 2014. “Racialization.” In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*. 3rd ed., edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler. New York, NY: New York University Press. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link384>

20 See: Michael Omi and Howard Winant. 2014. *Racial Formation in the United States*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Routledge.

21 “White Supremacy.” 2020. Lexico. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link385>.