

## Our World Through a Jewish Lens

Elective Lesson Plan for students in grades 8–10, using original source materials  
Ramona L. Brand, Director of Education  
Congregation Beth Ahabah, 1111 W Franklin Street, Richmond VA 23220

This lesson plan is designed as a 5- to 6-week elective class series. Each class is designed to be 45 minutes to 1 hour in duration.

### Goals:

- Students will be introduced to the medium of photography and how it can be used as an expression of Jewish storytelling, personal and social values, and a creative outlet.
- Students will be introduced to Ruth Gruber as a ground-breaking photojournalist. They will learn about her life, her work, and how her Jewish background and values influenced her work as a photojournalist with historical impact.
- Students will ask the questions:
  1. Is there such thing as a Jewish picture?
  2. What makes a picture “Jewish”? The subject; the photographer; the scene?
  3. Can I express a Jewish point of view through my photography?
  4. What makes an interesting photograph?
- Students will be challenged to use their cameras or cell phones to take pictures that embody personal Jewish connections.
- This project will help bridge the school–home connection and strengthen the students’ Jewish identities as they view their world through a Jewish lens.
- Students will engage in weekly peer review of submitted photos and will choose two final pictures to be framed and exhibited.

### Lesson 1

#### Materials:

laptop, projector, or handouts of pictures listed below, if not using internet

- [Photo 1](#) (see appendix)  
<http://www.themodernjewishwedding.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/modern-jewish-wedding-hora-1.jpg>  
Source: Camera Famosa Photography
- [Photo 2](#)  
[https://lbfecicago.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/helping\\_elderly.jpg](https://lbfecicago.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/helping_elderly.jpg)  
Source: Little Brothers–Friends of the Elderly Chicago
- [Photo 3](#)  
<https://fansinaflashbulb.wordpress.com/2010/04/22/earthday-2010/>  
Source: Alfred Eisenstaedt, *Giant oak tree in N’Tisbury, Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts*, 1968
- [Photo 4](#)  
<http://www.jpost.com/HttpHandlers/ShowImage.ashx?id=255307&h=530&w=758>  
Source: Reuters

**Set Induction:** Write the phrase "A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words." on the board before the students enter.

**Methods:**

- a. Direct students' attention to phrase on board and ask them for suggestions about its meaning. Answers and discussion may vary but should eventually lead to defining the phrase closely as such:

The adage "**A picture is worth a thousand words**" refers to the notion that a complex idea can be conveyed with just a single still image. It also aptly characterizes one of the main goals of visualization, namely making it possible to absorb large amounts of data quickly.

- b. How can this definition apply to the art of photography? Discuss; *answers will vary*

(steps a & b: 10–12 minutes)

- c. Show students the four images listed above. Ask the students to verbalize what each image shows. Is there a story or message being related by each picture? *Record answers on the board.* Ask students if they would describe any of the pictures as "Jewish" and why or why not. *Record answers on board (possible answers - celebrating a Jewish life cycle event; performing Mitzvah by assisting the elderly, tree can represent Torah, tree of life etc., Holocaust, Jewish history, survival, righteous gentiles (note nuns in the picture)).* Discussion: can a picture *be* Jewish? Who took these pictures, why and for what purpose? (Photo 1 taken by studio for business; photo 2 is a stock photo for non-profit service organization; photo 3 is by photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt, a professional photographer whose work frequently appeared in Life Magazine; photo 4 taken by news agency Reuters to document Holocaust survivors.)

Ask students "Can a picture be "Jewish" if not taken by a Jewish photographer?" (Note: only photo 3, taken by Alfred Eisenstaedt, is by a photographer who was Jewish.) *Answers may vary, but should concede that Jewish themes can be present in photos taken by non-Jews.* Which picture is most artistically compelling and why? (Possible answers: photo 1 for movement, expresses happiness and has excitement; photo 3 for composition, peaceful, timeless quality; photo 4 for emotion, composition, interest.) Photo 2 is usually considered least interesting and artistic.

- d. Review answers to questions 1–4 listed in Goals. Conclude that while a picture in and of itself is not "Jewish," photography can be used to express Jewish ideas, point of view, reflect values, and influence emotions. Photographers of such photos can be both Jewish and non-Jewish.

(steps c & d: 20–25 minutes)

- e. Present students with definition of the word **photojournalism**. Photojournalism: journalism in which written copy is subordinate to pictorial, usually photographic, presentation of news stories or in which a high proportion of pictorial presentation is used

Ask students: which of the four photos we have seen may constitute photojournalism? (Usual answer: photo 4)

Inform students that they will be learning about a respected photojournalist who was both a woman and Jewish.

- Divide students into 3 groups and direct them to <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/gruber-ruth>
- Instruct group 1 to read paragraphs 1–6 in article, group 2 to read paragraphs 7–12, and group 3 to read paragraphs 13–18. Each group is to find five facts about Ruth Gruber in their assigned paragraphs to share with the larger group.
- When all of the groups are done reading, have each group share their five facts starting with group 1. Have one student record the 15 facts to save for next class.

(step e: 15–20 minutes)

## Lesson 2

**Preparation:** Write on board or have as handout the following:

Ruth Gruber is an American journalist, photographer, writer, humanitarian and a former United States government official.

Ruth Gruber was born on September 30, 1911 in Brooklyn. Her parents were Russian Jewish immigrants. She dreamed of becoming a writer and was encouraged by her parents to obtain higher education. She graduated from college at the age of 18 and was the youngest person to earn a Ph.D at age 20. She traveled extensively taking photos in places such as the Arctic Circle and Alaska. Ruth Gruber worked for Harold Ickes the Secretary of the Interior under Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1944, she was assigned a secret mission to Europe to bring one thousand Jewish refugees and wounded American soldiers from Italy to the US. Ickes made her "a simulated general" so in case the military aircraft she flew in was shot down and she was caught by the Nazis, she would be kept alive according to the Geneva Convention. In 1947 she documented the plight of Jewish refugees after WWII and the treatment they suffered in British DP camps and on ships trying to get to Palestine. In 1985 (at the age of 74) she traveled to Ethiopia to document the rescue and exodus of the Ethiopian Jews to Israel. She has written numerous books and has received many prestigious awards.

**Materials:**

laptop, projector, or handouts of pictures and website listed below, if not using internet

- [Photo 1](#)  
[http://media.npr.org/assets/img/2011/10/15/11\\_rg\\_fami\\_port\\_m\\_vert-ebf239608560bd0734b0437053f579001136587e-s6-c30.jpg](http://media.npr.org/assets/img/2011/10/15/11_rg_fami_port_m_vert-ebf239608560bd0734b0437053f579001136587e-s6-c30.jpg)  
 Source: npr.org
- [Photo 2](#)  
[http://jwa.org/sites/jwa.org/files/styles/scale\\_width\\_300px/public/mediaobjects/rgruber.jpg?itok=2bP1UgCL](http://jwa.org/sites/jwa.org/files/styles/scale_width_300px/public/mediaobjects/rgruber.jpg?itok=2bP1UgCL)  
 Source: Jewish Women’s Archive, jwa.org
- [Photo 3](#)  
<http://graphics8.nytimes.com/packages/flash/Lens/2011/05/20110519-gruber/011-20110519-gruber.jpg>

Source: New York Times, May 20, 2011, Ruth Gruber from Exodus to Ethiopia

- [Photo 4](#)  
[http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/ruth-gruber-from-exodus-to-ethiopia/?\\_r=0](http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/ruth-gruber-from-exodus-to-ethiopia/?_r=0)  
Source: New York Times, May 20, 2011, Ruth Gruber from Exodus to Ethiopia
- [Online article](#)  
<http://www.americanphotomag.com/ruth-gruber-witness-world>

**Methods:**

- a. review from previous week’s lesson: ask students to recall what was discussed in lesson 1—refer to saved notes (step a: 7–10 minutes)
- b. Show selected Ruth Gruber photos above. With each picture ask the students to describe the story they see in the pictures. (*Answers will vary.*) What emotions do the pictures elicit? What may be the purpose of taking those pictures? (*Open-ended discussion*) Which picture has the most powerful effect on you? (*Answers will vary.*) Direct students’ attention to the short bio of Ruth Gruber. Inform them that photo 2 is a picture of Ruth Gruber. What can they tell about her from the biographical facts and the picture? (*Students may note that she is intelligent, adventurous, independent, strong minded, has strong values etc.*) (step b: 35–45 minutes)

*Instruct students to bring in personal laptops for next week, or smart phones, if they own them.*

**Lesson 3**

**Materials:**

Laptop, projector and/or student personal lap-tops/smart phones. Also have handout of “Witness for the World” available.

- a. Review from previous week’s lesson: ask students to recall what was discussed in lesson 2—refer to saved notes (step a: 7–10 minutes)
- b. Direct students to find a partner and to go to : <http://www.americanphotomag.com/ruth-gruber-witness-world>. Provide hand-out to students who do not have electronic devices. Distribute handout. Instruct students to follow the directions on the handout as they read the article online. Let them know that they will be discussing their findings as a class after they complete the work with their partner. (step b: 30-40 minutes)
- c. Tell students that they will now become photojournalists, like Ruth Gruber. Instruct them to take pictures during their week, at home, at school (when allowed), during time with friends, at services (when appropriate) etc. Tell them to think about taking photos that are overtly “Jewish” and those that may not be. Students should email their favorite pictures (no more than five) of that week to the instructor BEFORE the next class. Give students an email address. Tell them to be creative and open to lots of photographic opportunities and that they can use filters or other effects if desired. (step c. 10-15 minutes)

(Note: instructor will save photos as they come in; I found it best to create sub-folders with each student's name and to save directly to that sub-folder. I also sent reminder emails to the kids and the parents on each Thursday BEFORE the following Monday night's class. I also saved their pictures to a thumb-drive as a back-up.)

#### Lesson 4

**Materials:** Laptop, projector, student pictures

- a. Review from previous week's lesson: ask students to recall what was discussed in lesson 3—refer to saved notes and handouts. (step a: 7–10 minutes)
- b. Peer-editing and sharing. Instructor will begin to show the pictures that students have sent during the week. Remind students that while they will be peer-editing and sharing with each other, the purpose is to discuss the photos artistically, but we are not judging other student's ability to take photos or to choose subject matter. (Most students are very respectful and supportive of their friends' work.)
  - Ask the students to tell the story behind each photo and if, why and how it constitutes "looking at the world through a Jewish Lens". The instructor can direct the conversation and comments toward effectiveness of picture to tell the story, color, balance, perspective etc.
  - Encourage students to discuss the pictures as they are viewed.
  - Have each student vet their photos and par them down to 2 or 3 of their 5 (or 1-2 of 3 photos) etc. Instructor will make note of the photos each student wishes to keep in the "gallery". (step b: 20–30 minutes)
- c. I end this class session by taking my students in to our sanctuary and around our school and building with the lights off or dimmed. This is really exciting for the kids and they don't see the Sanctuary lit in this manner. This gives them an opportunity for getting interesting pictures with different lighting elements and they see the Sanctuary with fresh eyes. (step. c. as remaining class time allows)
- d. Remind students to email these pictures and any more that they take during the week. Again—it is always good to send an email reminder the students during the week to send their pictures in before the next class.

#### Lesson 5

**Materials:** Laptop, projector, student pictures

- a. Peer-editing and sharing. Instructor will show the second set of pictures that students have sent during the week. Remind students that while they will be peer-editing and sharing with each other, the purpose is to discuss the photos artistically, but we are not judging other student's ability to take photos or to choose subject matter. (Most students are very respectful and supportive of their friends' work.)

- Ask the students to tell the story behind each photo and if, why and how it constitutes “looking at the world through a Jewish Lens”. The instructor can direct the conversation and comments toward effectiveness of picture to tell the story, color, balance, perspective etc.
  - Encourage students to discuss the pictures as they are viewed.
  - Have each student vet their photos and par them down to 2 or 3 of their 5 (or 1-2 of 3 photos) etc. Instructor will make note of the photos each student wishes to keep in the “gallery.”
  - Now have students compare with the pictures from the previous week and choose their final 2 pictures. Encourage students to pick two different types of photos for their final “gallery.” (step a: 30–45 minutes)
- b. Journaling: Students will write descriptions for their final picture choices. The descriptions should explain the story, mood or reason for taking the picture. Students should be able to express the Jewish ‘view-point’ behind the picture. **Instructor will collect descriptions and make note of which final photos have “made the cut.”** (step b: 15 minutes)
- \*During the week, the instructor will have the final pictures printed in 5X7 size. Instructor will also purchase inexpensive mats and frames (found at local craft and dollar stores). I get a variety of mat colors and frame colors from which the students can choose. It is advisable to have several more frames and mats than photos, so that there is some extras just in case of glass breakage and extra color choice.

### Lesson 6

**Materials:** 5X7 prints of the final photos, frames and mats, paper towel, Windex or other glass cleaner, acid free tape.

- a. Distribute photos to students. Instruct students to sample their pictures behind various colors of mats before choosing, can discuss how mat color enhances/highlight aspects of photos. Encourage students to “peer edit” mat choices with classmates.
- b. Do the same with the frames. (steps a.& b: 25–40 minutes)
- c. Have students clean glass and dry thoroughly before mounting the picture. Use the acid free tape to adhere photos to back of mat. Share framed pictures with each other. Instructor will collect finished pictures for exhibit in school or synagogue space. (step c: 20 minutes)

**Final follow-up – Invite parents to “Opening” of exhibit and have students present their work.**

**Appendix 1.**

**RUTH GRUBER: WITNESS FOR THE WORLD**

By Ruth Gruber Posted September 28, 2012

<http://www.americanphotomag.com/ruth-gruber-witness-world>



Dan Bracaglia

**This weekend, the unstoppable Ruth Gruber will celebrate her 101st birthday. In our September/October issue, she shares her experiences photographing Holocaust refugees as they attempted to enter Palestine in 1947. What guidance does she have for young photographers? “I’d give them the advice that Edward Steichen gave me. He said, ‘Take pictures with your heart.’”**



© Ruth Gruber

**WWII refugees, some still in their concentration camp uniforms, on the deck of the *Henry Gibbins*, 1944.**

© Ruth Gruber

***The Exodus 1947* after being rammed by the British as it tried to enter Haifa Harbor, 1947.**

© Ruth Gruber

**The refugees of the *Runnymede Park* raise their modified flag: a Union Jack with a swastika on it.**

I first picked up a camera as a student. When I looked through that Leica for the first time, it was wonderful. Later I got a Rollei. I was so startled when I looked in it. You could see a whole scene there. I didn’t think a camera could do that. People ask, “Did you take a course?” Who took courses? You just learned by doing. The camera taught me.

At 18, I got a fellowship to the University of Wisconsin to study German and English literature. From there, in 1931 I got a fellowship to Cologne, Germany [where, at age 20, Gruber became the world’s youngest Ph.D.–Ed.].

After I came back to New York, I used to go to Romany Marie's restaurant in Greenwich Village to have coffee. She had certain tables for very famous people. One was for Vilhjalmur Stefánsson, the famous Arctic explorer. One night I was at the restaurant with Edna, my best friend from junior high, and Romany Marie mentioned to Stef (as we all called him) that I had just come back from Germany. He had a lot of reports from German ship captains and he hired me to translate them. I'd go to his place whenever my classes were over and work for him.

In 1935 I traveled through Europe and the Soviet Union on an exchange fellowship from the Institute of International Education. Stef gave me a beautiful letter of introduction to a famous geographer, who I met in Leningrad. He introduced me to Otto Yulievich Schmidt, the Czar of the Arctic. Schmidt asked me if I'd like to go to the Soviet arctic. I knew that nobody had been allowed to do that before. I tried to be casual. I said, "Well, I think I might like to go." I hoped he wouldn't see how my legs were shaking. He said,



"Whenever you're ready, we'll send you." I went back to Moscow, and I told some of the famous reporters that I was going to the Arctic. I think if they had a knife, they would have cut my throat.

**"WHEN THEY FOUND OUT I WAS A JEW FROM BROOKLYN, THEY SAID, 'WOULD YOU TELL OUR FAMILIES WE'RE ALIVE?' AND THEY WROTE TELEPHONE**

**NUMBERS DOWN."**

© Ruth Gruber

I had done some writing for the *New York Herald Tribune* and when they heard that I was going, they said, "Whenever you see a good story, send it to us." There was so much to photograph, so much to write. The more I wrote, the better the pictures were. The more I took images, the better the writing was. The two interlock so beautifully.

After I came back, the *Herald Tribune* sent me to interview Harold Ickes, the Secretary of the Interior under Franklin D. Roosevelt. When I met him we talked about my time in the Arctic. He ended up hiring me to go to Alaska to do a study for him. The indigenous people loved the magazines I brought, especially *Life* and *Look*. They loved those photos. The ship with food, clothes and magazines only came once or twice a year up there.

After 18 months in Alaska, Ickes hired me as his special assistant. I wrote letters for him. In 1944, after parts of Italy were liberated, there were people in European internment camps who wanted to come to the U.S., but the U.S. had rigid immigration quotas in place. Roosevelt got around it by secretly making 1,000 of

them guests of the president. That allowed them to be brought into the U.S. during the war. It was a mix of concentration camp victims and others who'd been hidden from the Nazis during the war, some in monasteries, others in people's basements. They were brought over on a boat called the *Henry Gibbins*. Ickes asked me to go to Italy and ride back with the refugees to take their case histories and help them acclimate.

In 1946, after the war ended, and before the formation of Israel, there were a lot of Jews in the European displaced person (DP) camps that wanted to go to Palestine, which at that time was controlled by the British. President Truman asked the British to let the Jews in. Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, was against it, but couldn't say no to Truman after the way the U.S. had helped the U.K. during the war. So he made a deal. They formed the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine. Six Britons and six Americans would travel for four months through the DP camps and the Arab world to evaluate whether 100,000 Jews from the camps would be allowed into Palestine. Bevin said that if the committee voted unanimously for it, they would let the refugees in. He figured it would never happen.

I was still working for Ickes when I got a call from the editor of the *New York Post*. He said, "Ruth, we need you. Take a leave of absence from your job and travel with that committee." I said I'd have to check with my boss. Ickes said, "As long as I work here, I need you." So I called the newspaper back. "The boss says no." But the next day Ickes called me to his office and said, "I was wrong. You must go. You owe it to your people. Just write me a resignation letter first." He knew he'd quit soon. He and Truman were fighting all the time, mostly about oil. Ickes felt nobody should be allowed to drill for oil offshore, because he foresaw the damage it could do. And look what happened.

### **"AND I WAS THE ONLY ONE WITH A CAMERA."**

So I joined up with the committee. We went to the DP camps in Germany and Arab villages in Palestine. Then the committee voted. They were unanimous. The Jews would be allowed into Palestine. Three days of joy. They were dancing in the streets in Tel Aviv and New York. They were going to get 100,000 DPs into Palestine. Everybody was so thrilled. Then after three days it was dead. Bevin and the British government rejected the recommendation. I returned to the States.



The following year, the *Herald Tribune* sent me to Palestine to cover the arrival of the *Exodus 1947*. Activists had arranged for the ship to carry 4,500 refugees to Palestine from the DP camps in Europe. When they tried to enter Haifa Harbor, the British rammed the ship from two sides. You can see the destruction in some of the pictures I took. The Jewish leaders in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem had sent word: "You can throw fruit, you can throw meat, but you cannot shoot. We are not killers." So they had no weapons. The British came onto the boat with sticks, with guns. They killed one of the mates, Bill Bernstein, because he stood in front of the wheelhouse to prevent them from taking over the ship. A 16-year-old orphan was looking through a porthole and saw one of the marines coming up with a gun. He threw an orange at the marine. The marine shot and killed him. In the struggle, another 16-year-old was killed and more than 100 were wounded. They brought the

ship into the harbor and made them throw all their belongings, which were just rags and stuff, in a pile. They said, "Don't worry, you'll get them back." Of course they never saw them again. You could see women looking for children. You could see them searching for their relatives. They were taken to a temporary prison camp in Cyprus, and after that they were loaded onto three prison ships, the *Ocean Vigour*, the *Empire Rival* and the *Runnymede Park*. Then the British deported them back to France.

So I went to France. When they arrived, the refugees refused to leave the ships. I knew I had to get aboard one of them. The British Consul was only going to allow three journalists in, one from England, one from France and one from the U.S. I was selected to represent the Americans. It was sheer luck. And I was the only one with a camera.

I was let on to the *Runnymede Park*, which had 1,500 of the refugees from the *Exodus*. When I went aboard, they said, "You're on your own." When the refugees learned that they had an American Jew on board, they raised a banner. They had painted the swastika on top of the Union Jack. I took endless photos of it. They became the most famous pictures I ever took.

Ruth Gruber



These were Jews the world had never seen before. They were going to live. They showed me what it means to fight. Not politically or non-politically, but to fight to survive. I talked to them for a while. They said, "Go below. Go see our floating Auschwitz." So I went below, and there they were: over a thousand people in the hold of the *Runnymede Park* (see gallery above). They were only allowed to come up from the bottom for two hours a day. That was when they could use the outhouse—six holes for 1,500 people. The rest of the time they were locked up in this cave. There were babies everywhere. The men and women were determined to have babies. It gave them back their being.

When they found out I was a Jew from

Brooklyn, they said, "Would you tell our families we're alive?" And they wrote telephone numbers down. I promised to call all their relatives. Some of them had families that hadn't heard from them in years.

### **Witness**

When they saw I had a camera, they said, "Take pictures. Let the world see how we're being treated here in this horror."

So I took pictures. There was a woman with a baby—a gorgeous, gorgeous baby. And I said, "Your baby is so beautiful." She said, "I know. But I'm finished. I can't live anymore." I said, "Don't talk that way. You'll get there." She looked at me, and I looked at that baby. I said, "Can I hold it?" She said, "Yes." So I cuddled it. At

that point I didn't know who needed the hugging more, that beautiful baby or me. I asked the woman, "How old are you?" She said, "Twenty-three." I said, "You'll get there. Don't worry. They can't do anything more to you." And she said, "I'll live, because I want the world to know what we've gone through."

After we got off the ships, the British Consul called us all together. That's when he noticed I had my camera. He yelled at me in front of all of the reporters, "You took pictures! I demand your camera and the photos!" I said, "I'm sorry, sir." And I turned on my heels and I walked away.

When I got back to the hotel I had the film printed immediately. Then I called the head of the Paris Herald Tribune and told him the story. He said, "Who has the pictures?" I said, "What do you mean who has the pictures? I have the pictures!" He said, "Well, write your story. I promise you we'll run it first page. Then come and see me." So I wrote the story and took the pictures to him. He looked at them and said, "Ruth, I get photos every day, and I never cry." He said, "I looked at your photos, and I cried. They don't belong to you. They don't belong to the *Herald Tribune*. They belong to the world." And that's the way I looked at them after that.

