

## **The Jewish Community in America, Past and Present**

### **Lesson plan for adults**

*This lesson plan is part of a larger lesson entitled "Writing Home: A Letter from an early American Jew," which can be found at <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/nov05/>. Visit this website to download the featured primary document, "Letter from Rebecca Samuel to Parents, 1790s."*

- 1. Begin with a brief overview** of the beginnings of the American Jewish community. Summarize the introduction provided on the Go & Learn web page, or ask the following questions to elicit this history:
  - When did the first Jewish community reach American shores?
  - When were the first organized Jewish communities and synagogues created?
  - When did the first Jewish settlers come to your state?
  - What were the first Jewish institutions in your city?
- 2. Discuss** what Jewish organizations and resources would be necessary for the first Jewish Americans to create a sustainable Jewish community. Are these the same resources we consider indispensable today?
- 3. Introduce the letter by Rebecca Samuel** and have a participant read the letter aloud.
- 4. Discuss** as a group:
  - What is most striking to you about Rebecca Samuel's letter?
  - What are her greatest concerns about life in America?
- 5. Compare the contemporary American Jewish community** with the community Rebecca Samuel encountered. First write on a board the categories of the organized Jewish world (a sample list is below), and then

under these categories, list all of the American Jewish organizations that your group can come up with. If you think your group will need help, print the organization directory page of the UJC (United Jewish Communities) website, [http://www.ujc.org/ir\\_category\\_listing.html?nt=0&id=199](http://www.ujc.org/ir_category_listing.html?nt=0&id=199) and figure out where each organization would fit in the following categories. The UJC list is not complete, so you will also want to ask what organizations are not represented there.

Categories of American Jewish organizations:

- Federations and national umbrella organizations
- denominations/movements
- education
- camps and youth organizations
- social services
- community relations
- ritual organizations (kashrut, cemeteries, mikvahs)
- Zionist/aid to Israel
- Health
- women's/men's associations
- political advocacy
- newspapers and websites...

**6. When your list of organizations is finished, consider and discuss** (this may be done as a large group, individually by writing first, or in smaller discussion groups):

- Which of these Jewish organizations do you feel most connected to and/or committed to?
- Which of these organizations have served you or your family in direct or indirect ways?
- What (if any) resources do you feel are missing from the American Jewish community today?

- What do we learn about the American Jewish community from its institutional life? What isn't reflected in these institutions?
- By what criteria does the American Jewish community measure its successes and its challenges? Do you agree with these criteria? What other criteria or measurements are important to you? Do we use the same criteria for evaluation that Rebecca Samuel did?
- If Rebecca Samuel were to see organized American Jewish life in action today, what do you think would most surprise her? Gladden her? Sadden her?