

Pioneering Spirits: A Personalized History of Our Jewish Community
Lesson plan for family/congregational education

In this activity, three multi-generational family or congregant groups rotate through stations facilitated by discussion leaders: one is a pictorial history of your own community, one is a dramatic reading of the Rebecca Samuel letter from Petersburg, VA in the 1790s, and one is the families' retelling and recording of their own family histories onto a community timeline. Each group should spend 25-30 minutes at each station. First we will outline these stations, and then provide some suggestions about openings and closings for this activity.

In a large auditorium or a few different classrooms, set up these three different stations:

Station 1:

For this station, find images and primary documents that portray the history of your congregation or community, and display them so that everyone can see. Most congregations have an archive of images, but you can also do some further research, either through your local historical society or on the web (to start, at the top of Google's menu bar you can choose "images" and type in "Jewish" and the name of your city or state). If it's not possible to collect images of your own community, find a variety of images and texts from Jewish immigrants to America in general — a good number can be found on the JWA website. At this station, the facilitator will encourage participants to browse the images and documents and then will lead a discussion:

- What information about the beginnings and history of this community can be gathered through these images?
- What can you tell about the values of the community from these images? About the material resources? About the people who founded or sustained the community?
- What do these images *not* portray?
- What questions do these images/documents inspire?
- Do any of you remember any of the events or people in these images? If so, do you have stories/memories about them?
- (Adapt and/or add specific questions relevant to the images you choose.)

Station 2:

In the second station, the facilitator will give a dramatic reading of the Rebecca Samuel letter. You might want her to dress in appropriate approximation of 18th century garb. She will introduce herself to the group and explain that she has just written this letter (in Yiddish) to her parents in Germany, and then read the letter aloud. Next, she can ask participants if they have any questions for her (although we have little biographical information other than what is in the letter itself), or she or another facilitator can discuss with the group:

- What are Rebecca Samuel's concerns? What are her hopes and her fears?
- What do we learn about Rebecca Samuel from this one letter? What else do we wish we knew about her?
- What do you think Rebecca Samuel would think of your Jewish community if she could see it now, more than 200 years after she wrote her impressions of Jewish life in her corner of America? What would most surprise her? What would she see that would make her happy? What might make her sad?

Station 3:

In the third station, groups will record their own families' histories in the community and create a personalized timeline for the congregation. Attach a long sheet of butcher paper to the wall, with a timeline on it that starts at 1654 and ends in 2005. At 1654, write "First Jewish community arrives in America from Brazil." Add the dates for the first Jewish settlers arriving in your city/state, the founding of your congregation/school, and other important community milestones. Give each family group a 4x6 index card, and ask them to write on it:

- Their family name/s
- Name of the first family member to arrive in your city/state
- Year first family member arrived
- Where he/she arrived from
- Any brief funny, poignant, or memorable story about her/his arrival, trip, or character

When they are done, have each group tape or tack its card onto the community timeline, and allow time for the groups to view and share each other's cards, names, dates, and stories.

Suggestions for Opening/Closing Activities:

- Invite an older member of your congregation or someone who immigrated in her/his lifetime to tell a few stories to the whole group. Topics might include her/his first impressions of the community, how s/he arrived in your city, recollections of changes to the major Jewish institutions in your town over the years, or memories of important communal leaders.
- Invite community members who moved to your city more recently to share their perspectives on the unique aspects of your community.
- Invite a local historian to give a brief history of your Jewish community.
- Read or tell a children's story that teaches something about your state's history, the life of an immigrant, or memories of an "old country."
- Create three new, age-based groups that mix the members from the original three groups, and discuss: What stories did you hear and images did you see today that you hope the next generation in your community will also hear or see? What did you learn about your own family or community that you never knew before?