

SEEING YOUR JEWISH COMMUNITY THROUGH DIFFERENT EYES

Lesson plan for youth

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/>.

- 1. Reading the following journal entry**, and ask students to guess who they thought wrote this, when, and why.

Dear Kitty!

There's never been a better day than today.

Today we were invited to a synagogue by some volunteers we had met named Rose and Joyce. They came for us in a taxi and took us to this synagogue. I've never seen richer people than these, or nicer ones. I've never seen such enormous tables with white tablecloths and dishes of food that make the tables sag. What nice people these American Jews are.

The text is from a journal entry by Raimonda Koplnitsky, from April of 1990. She emigrated from Ukraine to the United States as a girl, and published a book, called No Words to Say Goodbye, about her experiences as an immigrant. (This excerpt originally came from an online version of her journal entry, which was formerly available on the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society website, <https://www.hias.org/>.)

- 2. Tell your students** that today we're going to look at another letter by a Jewish woman who immigrated to America, this one from much earlier in America's history. Ask students to consider:

- What can be interesting about an immigrant's perspective of your country or community? What might they see that you don't?

- Do you think you would have described your synagogue like Raimonda did? Why or why not?

3. Review a timeline of Jewish immigration to America. Put these dates on the board or ask students to help you do so:

1492: *Expulsion of Jews from Spain*

1654: *First community of Jewish settlers arrive in New Amsterdam (New York)*

1600s-1700s: *Wave of Sephardic Jewish immigrants to America.*
(In 1776 there were approximately 2,500 Jews living in America)

1820-1880: *Wave of German Jews to America*
(In 1820s there were approximately 6,000 American Jews; by 1880 there were approximately 280,000)

1880-1929: *Wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants*
(By 1925 there were approx. 4,500,000 Jews in the U.S.)

2005: *Estimate of current U.S. Jewish population is between 5 and 6 million.*

For a quick history of the first Jewish settlers in America, download these pages from our *Making Our Wilderness Bloom* curriculum:

<http://www.jwa.org/teach/curriculum/mowb-unit1.pdf>, pages 9-12.

4. Read Rebecca Samuel's letter to her parents, describing life in Petersburg, Virginia in the 1790s. (You can download the letter by visiting <http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/nov05/>.) Locate the spot on your timeline around the time when Rebecca Samuel wrote her letter. You can also show your students the sketch of Charleston's Beth Elohim synagogue, which appears on this month's *Go & Learn* web page (use URL above).

5. Discuss with your students:

- What does Rebecca Samuel describe to her parents?
- What is she most surprised by, happy about, and concerned about in her new country?
- What do you find most interesting about her letter?

6. Ask your students to imagine that Rebecca Samuel traveled 215 years into the future and arrived in 2005 in your own Jewish community. Have your students write a letter from Rebecca Samuel to her parents, describing what she sees. What in your Jewish community would she be most surprised by? What would she be most excited about? What might sadden her? It might help to ask them to imagine Rebecca arriving at their synagogue on Shabbat or the High Holidays, or attending a Jewish community school or event. Ask the students to share their letters or display them for the community to see.

7. Conclusion discussion:

- What do you think is most striking about how the Jewish community in America has changed since the first Jewish settlers?
- Imagine if you and your family had to move from your home to a different country. What would you miss the most? What would be the hardest thing about the transition? What would you wish for in your new home, in your new country? What kind of Jewish community would you hope to find?

Suggestions for follow-up activities:

- Invite members of your community who immigrated to the U.S. in their lifetime to come and talk to your class about their experiences.
- Ask students to gather immigration stories from their own families.
- Research Jewish organizations that work with recent immigrants, or invite someone from these organizations to come and discuss their work.

- Good websites to begin your exploration:

<http://www.jfrej.org/JewishImmigrantJustice.html>: website of JFREJ (Jews for Racial & Economic Justice) on their program called Jewish Immigrant Justice.

<http://www.hias.org/who-we-are/mission-%2526-goals>: website of HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), founded in 1881, which works to rescue and resettle refugees and advocate for and support migrants.

<http://www.jewishpublicaffairs.org>: Jewish Council for Public Affairs is an umbrella organization that creates policy regarding Jewish community relations with other groups. Once on their website, search for “immigrants and refugees” to read about their past work on behalf of immigrants and refugees.

<http://www.aclu.org/ImmigrantsRights/ImmigrantsRightsMain.cfm>: Website of the ACLU, which is not a Jewish organization, but has worked on behalf of Jewish communities on immigration issues as well as related issues of religious freedom.