



## *Making Our Wilderness Bloom*

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350 YEARS OF EXTRAORDINARY JEWISH WOMEN IN AMERICA

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## TEACHER'S GUIDE TO UNIT ONE

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### **UNIT ONE: SETTLING IN AMERICA**

#### **UNIT OVERVIEW**

This unit consists of three introductory lessons focusing on the settlement of Jews in America, from the first settlers to more recent immigrant stories to the students' own family histories. We consider what it takes to create a sustainable Jewish community, and we introduce the strategies of learning from primary documents, which will prepare students for Unit Two.

## UNIT ONE, Part 1

### THE FIRST JEWISH SETTLERS IN AMERICA

#### OVERVIEW

In this lesson, we will look at the first Jewish community in America, formed when 23 Jews arrived in New Amsterdam from Brazil in 1654. We will start with a brief history of this group's background and travels, explore the hopes and expectations of the new pioneers, and learn about the range of new freedoms and restrictions they encountered as Jews in America. We will consider what it takes to create a sustainable Jewish community, and we will read a letter from an 18th-century Jewish woman in America to her parents in Germany, describing the conditions of Jewish life in a small pioneer town.

#### CONCEPTS

- Sephardic Jews escaping the Inquisition travelled from Spain to many other points in Europe and were the first settlers in America.
- The first American Jewish settlers were Dutch subjects who had to fight for their right to stay in the new country, but once here, enjoyed many new religious, economic, political, and social freedoms.
- It takes many physical and human resources to create a sustainable Jewish community. In early Jewish communities, men and women had different priorities for how to use the few resources available, based on their distinct roles in family and community life. The roles of rabbis and community institutions have changed significantly in the past 350 years.
- The Jewish pioneers had to make difficult decisions about how to practice Judaism with the limited resources they had. Considering the humble and tenuous beginnings of this American Jewish community can help us appreciate how impressive the institutions, the standing, and the roots of the American Jewish community are today.

#### MATERIALS

- Text 1: Descriptive narrative, "The First Jewish Settlers, 1654"
- Text 2: Descriptive narrative, "Jewish Life in Early America"
- Text 3: Letter from Rebecca Samuel, Petersburg, Virginia to parents in Germany, late 1700s
- Worksheet: "My Family's Immigration History"

**SUGGESTED LESSON OUTLINE**

*Teacher's Notes*

1. Texts 1 and 2 can be used either as reading material for the students or as background material to enable you to tell the story of the first Jewish American settlers. You may want to have the students read aloud, or you may want to first elicit their knowledge about the wanderings of the Sephardic Jews. (Many students will have learned about the Inquisition in school, and the "eliciting" approach allows them to connect their previous knowledge to this new context). A succession of leading questions might go something like this:

"Who wants to guess where the first Jewish settlers to America actually arrived from?" (Let them guess, until Brazil is mentioned or you provide the answer).

"Twenty-three Brazilian Jews are considered the first Jewish community in America. They were Sephardic Jews. Where do Sephardic Jews originally come from?" (Spain)

"So why didn't these 23 come directly from Spain? What happened to the Spanish Jews?" (The Inquisition)

"Great. What was the Inquisition?" (Get some answers and fill in the rest of the important facts.)

"Where did the Spanish Jews go when they were expelled?" (They scattered all across Europe; however many went to neighboring Portugal. Fill in the fact that Portugal joined the forces of the Inquisition and that these Jews then moved on again, with many going to the more tolerant, Protestant country of Holland. Explain the colonizing of Brazil by the Dutch.)

"Why would the originally Sephardic, now Dutch Jews be great candidates for helping to colonize and bring business to Brazil?" (They had both Portuguese and Dutch language and culture. Touch on the thriving Jewish community in the short-lived years of Dutch rule of Brazil, and the choice, once again, of where to move when the Portuguese regained control in 1653.)

"How do you think the 23 Jews who chose to come to the Dutch-controlled colony of North America were received in 1654?"

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**Teacher's Notes**

**2.** After you have read Text 1 or elicited the history it contains, ask the students to pair with a neighbor for two-minute discussions on each of the following questions:

- There were individual Jewish men who came to America before 1654. If so, why do we mark the history of Jewish life in America from 1654? (What do women and children add to Jewish life that even a group of men cannot?)
- Imagine you were one of that first group of settlers: what do you think you'd be feeling as you landed in New Amsterdam? What would you be hoping for? What would your concerns be?

When their brief discussions are done, ask what they came up with. Emphasize that without women, there is no possibility for a Jewish "community" to continue and grow, and that women played an especially important role in making a Jewish home and raising a Jewish family.

**3.** Read or describe the history presented in Text 2. This piece focuses on what life was like for these first Jewish settlers, and what opportunities and restrictions they faced in their new country. (Since this history is more specific than that in Text 1, we recommend a more direct approach of students reading or teachers describing this history from the text itself).

**4.** With a new neighbor this time, ask students to discuss the following questions, again giving just two minutes per question. Afterwards, ask for their responses.

- Why were Jews restricted from taking charity from Christians? What would they have to do instead, if they were in need?
- If you were used to restrictions that limited you to only socializing with and marrying Jews, and only being allowed to engage in certain types of work, how would it feel to have the new freedoms the Jews experienced in America? Do you think there were any drawbacks to so many new freedoms?

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**Teacher's Notes**

5. In this activity, students will consider what it takes to create a sustainable new Jewish community. The students should imagine that they are pioneers in a new town in America in the 1600s or 1700s, with anywhere from 10 to 100 Jews in their new community. You can facilitate this activity as a “town meeting.” Depending on the size and energy of your group, you can do this as a whole-group discussion, or break the students into two or more groups. If in groups, tell one group they are men, and one group they are women (or if in three groups: men, women, and youth). They are, of course, traditional Jews — Reform and Conservative Judaism have yet to be developed — with traditional gender and religious roles. Have them brainstorm:

- What would it take (in terms of physical and human resources) to create a sustainable Jewish community in this new place? Ask them to make a list.

At this point, it might be helpful to write their lists on the board, and tease out some more information. If they only have synagogues, a Sefer Torah, siddurim, religious schools, and a rabbi on their list, ask them to consider lifecycle/ritual needs (mohel, cemetary, mikvah, chevra kadisha) and daily necessities (shochet, kosher meat, tzedakah collectors). Especially with the suggestion of “rabbi,” ask what a rabbi is actually (legally) required for. Although the students may be accustomed to a rabbi leading all services and performing bnai mitzvah and weddings, these are roles any knowledgeable (and traditionally, male) Jews can perform, whereas a rabbi actually is required for a conversion, and as a halachic (Jewish legal) authority. They may want to add “minyan” to the list.

Once they have completed their lists, ask them to prioritize:

- Given that you can't have all of these immediately, what are your top three priorities? (If you have split them into groups of “men” and “women”, make sure to emphasize that they are considering their priorities as men or women. If you are working as a whole group, ask what differences there would be between the priorities of the women and the men.)

Discuss the differences between the men's needs and the women's. You might want to point out that Jewish tradition actually requires that in a

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**Teacher's Notes**

new town, building a mikvah is the first priority, before even a synagogue or a cemetery. This points to the importance of family life as the first building block of communal life.

6. Next, ask the students to consider what they would do if they were in a new place without any of these resources. Would they find more Jews and make a minyan? Try to organize donations to provide what the community needed? Would they become less religiously observant? (Without a shochet, would they attempt to learn how to slaughter meat to kosher standards? Would they become vegetarians? Would they eat non-kosher meat until a shochet arrived?)
7. Read Text 3, the letter from Rebecca Samuel, a Jewish pioneer in Petersburg, Virginia in the late 1700s, to her parents in Germany. The original letter was written in Yiddish. It might be helpful to point out that this is already close to 150 years after 1654, but it is still one of the earliest primary documents we have (especially relating to a woman) of early American Jewish life. Discuss with the students:
  - What were the conditions of Jewish life in Petersburg in the late 1700s? (What resources did they have? What didn't they have? Did Rebecca Samuel think a Jewish existence was sustainable there?)
  - What were Rebecca Samuel's primary concerns?
  - What was life like for her husband?
  - What was she doing in Petersburg to try to give her children a Jewish upbringing?
  - What was she looking forward to in Charleston?
  - What conditions of American life did she think were better for Jews (or in general) than life in the "old country"?

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8. To conclude this lesson, consider the advances the Jewish community has made over the past 350 years (or even the 200 years since Rebecca Samuel's description of Jewish life). You might want to discuss:
- How far has the Jewish community come in this time? (What resources do most Jewish communities, or the American Jewish community as a whole, now have? What do we take for granted?)
  - Does 350 years seem like a long time or a short time to have achieved these developments?
  - How has learning about the origins of the American Jewish community given you a different perspective on the current American Jewish community?
9. Finally, hand out student worksheet, "My Family's Immigration History" and ask students to find out when and how their (Jewish) family members immigrated to the United States. Let them know that in the next lesson, they will be plugging their own family history into the bigger picture of Jewish immigration to America.

***Teacher's Notes***



## UNIT ONE, Part 1

# Making Our Wilderness Bloom

## 350 YEARS OF EXTRAORDINARY JEWISH WOMEN IN AMERICA

### THE FIRST JEWISH SETTLERS IN AMERICA

#### Text 1: The First Jewish Settlers, 1654

In September 1654, the ship the Sainte Catherine docked on the docks of New Amsterdam in America. Among the passengers were 23 Jews — a group of men, women, and children — who had started their journey in Brazil, sailed to the Caribbean, and from there, boarded the Ste. Catherine. Along the way, the ship was attacked by pirates, and all of the worldly goods that the emigrants had carefully packed and brought with them on this long journey were taken. Nonetheless, the travelers were hopeful as they reached the shores of what we now call New York.

Why did this Jewish community leave Brazil in the first place? To answer this question, we have to go back even further, to the 15th century (1400s). These were Sephardic Jews, Jews whose families were originally from Spain. Jews had lived in Spain for a thousand years, often prosperously, before King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella's rule changed everything. Ferdinand and Isabella brought to Spain the Inquisition and forced all non-Catholics to convert or leave by August 1492. Some Sephardic Jews fled to countries across Europe and the Mediterranean, settling in Holland, Italy, Turkey, Greece, and North Africa, while others settled in Spain's neighboring and more tolerant country of Portugal. The Jews who converted to Catholicism were called Conversos; some Conversos embraced their new religion, while others secretly continued to practice Judaism. For almost 100 years, Jews and Conversos lived freely in Portugal, but in 1580, Portugal and Spain were united under one rulership, and again the Jews were forced to leave.

Holland, in northern Europe, was a haven of tolerance for the Jews, as well as a booming center of business and opportunity. Holland and its

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provinces were run by Dutch Protestants who hated the Spanish-Portuguese empire. In 1630, the Dutch took over the Portuguese colony of Brazil in South America, and many Dutch citizens moved to the new colony or travelled back and forth to do business there. The Dutch Sephardi Jews were at a real advantage in this trade because they knew both the Dutch and Portuguese languages. In Brazil, Jews and Conversos mixed and many Conversos, feeling safe with an ocean between themselves and the Inquisition, came back to Judaism. A thriving Jewish life existed in Brazil, with synagogues, a rabbi, a Jewish school, and approximately 5000 Jews at the community's height. But 23 years later, Portugal attacked Dutch Brazil and successfully regained control, causing the province's remaining 650 Jews to take flight once again.

Some of the Brazilian Jews returned to Amsterdam and others found homes across the West Indies, but 23 found their way to a small Dutch outpost in North America, trusting that New Amsterdam would match the tolerance of its namesake. (Ten years later, when the British gained control of America, New Amsterdam's name changed permanently to New York.) As loyal Dutch citizens who had helped build Dutch Brazil and had fought with the Dutch against Portugal, the Jews had every reason to believe they would be welcomed upon arrival in New Amsterdam.

When they arrived, however, the Governor of New Amsterdam, Peter Stuyvesant, believed the Jews would "infect and trouble this new colony," and he ordered them to leave on the next boat. The Jewish community protested, confident in their status as upright Dutch citizens and unwilling to consider another journey. Prominent Jews in Amsterdam wrote a letter on their behalf to the Dutch West India Company, stating their case, and the Jews in New Amsterdam tentatively settled into their new lives while awaiting the reply. Months later, the answer came in the form of a letter to Governor Stuyvesant, saying that barring the Jews from New Amsterdam would be "unreasonable and unfair." The letter did require, however, that in order for the Jews to stay, they would have to look after their own people and not depend on any charity from Christians.

## Text 2: Jewish Life in Early America

**A**lthough the Jewish settlers won their appeal to stay in the new country, life wasn't easy. They had arrived with few personal belongings and no money. The captain of the *Ste. Catherine* sued them upon arrival for their fares, which, because of the robbery onboard, they could not afford. A Jewish resident of New Amsterdam acted as their lawyer, but the group was forced to sell all belongings they still had to pay off each other's fares. They borrowed a good amount of money from the Christian community during their first winter in America but mostly had to make ends meet on their own, starting all over again in a new place with new rules.

We have very little information about that first group of 23. Historical documents record six names, Rycke (Rivka) Nounes, Judicq de Mereda, Asser Leveen, Abram Israel, David Israel, and Moses Ambrosius. Historians have guessed that these names represented the heads of household among the group of 23 and have surmised that Rycke and Judicq were widows, but we don't know how many other women arrived as wives of the men listed, or how many children belonged to each woman or family. We know little of what became of these first Jewish American settlers after they settled into the steep-roofed Dutch-style homes in New Amsterdam.

We do, however, know what some of the conditions were for these Jews and those who followed. Governor Stuyvesant, still unhappy about the presence of Jews in the colony, did not make their lives easier. He forbid them to trade along the upper Hudson River and refused to let them enter the militia (a task all other free men engaged in). But both Jewish assertiveness and practical realities overtook Stuyvesant's discriminatory principles; Jewish men fought for the right to greater trade, the Dutch West India Company overruled Stuyvesant's restrictions, and as necessity required more able-bodied men to fight the Indians, Jews were soon allowed to take on that role as well.

Jews continued to arrive in the newly British colony throughout the 17th and 18th centuries (1600s and 1700s). These were both Sephardim and, increasingly, also Ashkenazim (Jews of Central and Eastern European descent). In some regions of America they met certain restrictions because of their religion, especially in the devout Puritan areas, such as

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Massachusetts, where Jews were not allowed to settle or build synagogues until the 1800s. In other regions, Jews were welcomed, built synagogues, and had thriving communities. Records date the first congregation to 1693 at the latest, in New York; in 1730, this congregation built the earliest North American synagogue. The oldest synagogue that still exists is the Touro Synagogue, in Newport, Rhode Island, built in 1763.

Overall, Jews enjoyed much more freedom in the new country than they had in Europe. Jews in America could own land, engage in any type of business, employ Christians, and mix socially with Jews or non-Jews, and they had access to the same legal system as Christians. In Eastern Europe, Jews were a different class and did not enjoy these freedoms. Jews who wanted to get married had to apply for a marriage license, which were limited for Jews. They might have to wait years, or have to bribe the officials, in order to get married. In America, Jews could marry anyone they wanted to.

### Text 3: Letter from Rebecca Samuel to parents

*Written by Rebecca Samuel in Yiddish in the 1790s (exact date unknown); sent from Petersburg, Virginia to Hamburg, Germany*

Dear Parents:

I hope my letter will ease your mind. You can now be reassured and send me one of the family to Charleston, South Carolina. This is the place to which, with God's help, we will go after Passover. The whole reason why we are leaving this place is because of [its lack] of Yehudishkeit [Jewishness].

Dear parents, I know quite well you will not want me to bring up my children like Gentiles. Here they cannot become anything else. Jewishness is pushed aside here. There are here [in Petersburg, Virginia] ten or twelve Jews, and they are not worthy of being called Jews. We have a shohet [slaughterer of animals and poultry] here who goes to market and buys terefah [nonkosher] meat and then brings it home. On Rosh Ha-Shanah and on Yom Kippur the people worshipped here without one sefer Torah, and not one of them wore the tallit or the arba kanfot, except Hyman and my Sammy's godfather. The latter is an old man of sixty, a man from Holland. He has been in America for thirty years already; for twenty years he was in Charleston, and he has been living here for four years. He does not want to remain here any longer and will go with us to Charleston. In that place there is a blessed community of three hundred Jews.

You can believe me that I crave to see a synagogue to which I can go. The way we live now is no life at all. We do not know what the Sabbath and the holidays are. On the Sabbath all the Jewish shops are open, and they do business on that day as they do throughout the whole week. But ours we do not allow to open. With us there is still some Sabbath. You must believe me that in our house we all live as Jews as much as we can.

As for the Gentiles, we have nothing to complain about. For the sake of a livelihood we do not have to leave here. Nor do we have to leave because of debts. I believe ever since Hyman has grown up that he has not had it

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so good. You cannot know what a wonderful country this is for the common man. One can live here peacefully. Hyman made a clock that goes very accurately, just like the one in the Buchenstrasse in Hamburg. Now you can imagine what honors Hyman has been getting here. In all Virginia there is no clock [like this one], and Virginia is the greatest province in the whole of America, and America is the largest section of the world. Now you know what sort of a country this is. It is not too long since Virginia was discovered. It is a young country. And it is amazing to see the business they do in this little Petersburg. At times as many as a thousand hogsheads of tobacco arrive at one time, and each hogshead contains 1,000 and sometimes 1,200 pounds of tobacco. The tobacco is shipped from here to the whole world.

When Judah [my brother] comes here, he can become a watchmaker and goldsmith, if he so desires. Here it is not like Germany where a watchmaker is not permitted to sell silverware. They do not know otherwise here. They expect a watchmaker to be a silversmith here. Hyman has more to do in making silverware than with watchmaking. He has a journeyman, a silversmith, a very good artisan, and he, Hyman, takes care of the watches. This work is well paid here, but in Charleston, it pays even better.

All the people who hear that we are leaving give us their blessings. They say that it is sinful that such blessed children should be brought up here in Petersburg. My children cannot learn anything here, nothing Jewish, nothing of general culture. My Schoene [my daughter], God bless her, is already three years old; I think it is time that she should learn something, and she has a good head to learn. I have taught her the bedtime prayers and grace after meals in just two lessons. I believe that no one among the Jews here can do as well as she. And my Sammy [born in 1790], God bless him, is already beginning to talk.

I could write more. However, I do not have any more paper.

I remain, your devoted daughter and servant,  
Rebecca, the wife of Hayyim, the son of Samuel the Levite

## My Family's Immigration History

Find out as much as you can about when your Jewish relatives immigrated to the U.S., including when they came to America, where they came from, where they entered the U.S., where they settled once here, and any stories relating to their experience of immigration or settling in America. (You may not have all of the information for each of these categories. Leave blank any details you cannot find out.)

### Relative 1

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Relation to you (*e.g.*, *maternal grandfather*): \_\_\_\_\_

Date Entered U.S.: \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_

Port of entry: \_\_\_\_\_

American City/Cities s/he settled in: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Stories: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

### Relative 2

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Relation to you (*e.g.*, *maternal grandfather*): \_\_\_\_\_

Date Entered U.S.: \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_

Port of entry: \_\_\_\_\_

American City/Cities s/he settled in: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Stories: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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**Relative 3**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Relation to you (*e.g., maternal grandfather*): \_\_\_\_\_

Date Entered U.S.: \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_

Port of entry: \_\_\_\_\_

American City/Cities s/he settled in: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Stories: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Relative 4**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Relation to you (*e.g., maternal grandfather*): \_\_\_\_\_

Date Entered U.S.: \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_

Port of entry: \_\_\_\_\_

American City/Cities s/he settled in: \_\_\_\_\_

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Stories: \_\_\_\_\_

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**Relative 5**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Relation to you (*e.g., maternal grandfather*): \_\_\_\_\_

Date Entered U.S.: \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_

Port of entry: \_\_\_\_\_

American City/Cities s/he settled in: \_\_\_\_\_

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Stories: \_\_\_\_\_

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