AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY MONTH 2014

Background Information

In 1654, 23 Jews arrived on the shores of New Amsterdam (today New York City), marking the arrival of the first Jewish immigrants who came to settle in North America. In 2004, the 350th anniversary of Jewish history in North America was celebrated. Following this historic celebration, efforts to commemorate a national month in honor of Jewish history was envisioned by U.S. Representatives Deborah Wasserman Schultz (D, FL) and Henry Hyde (R-IL). They introduced a resolution to the United States House of Representatives calling for creation of Jewish American Heritage Month (JAHM). This resolution won strong support in both the House of Representatives and the Senate and President George W. Bush issued a Proclamation on April 20, 2006 calling on the nation to commemorate JAHM. In May 2007, the second annual Jewish American Heritage Month was proclaimed by President Bush. The 2007 presidential proclamation stated:

“The faith and hard work of Jewish Americans have played an integral role in shaping the cultural fabric of America. During Jewish American Heritage Month, we celebrate the vital contributions of Jewish Americans to our Nation.

Throughout our history, Jewish Americans have contributed to the strength of our country and the preservation of our values. The talent and imagination of these citizens have helped our Nation prosper, and their efforts continue to remind us of America's gift of religious freedom and the blessings of God's steadfast love. Jewish Americans have worked to promote civil rights and build bridges of mutual understanding among the world's religions. Their deep commitment to faith and strong ties to family enrich our country and set a positive example for others.

This month is also a time to recognize the sacrifices of Jewish Americans who serve our Nation in the Armed Forces. These brave men and women are dedicated to freedom's cause, and all those who live in freedom live in their debt.

Jewish American Heritage Month is an opportunity to honor the accomplishments of Jewish-American citizens and to remember that our Nation is a melting pot of cultures. I join all Americans in celebrating the rich Jewish heritage and the many ways Jewish Americans contribute to a bright future for our country.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, GEORGE W. BUSH, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim May 2007 as Jewish American Heritage Month. I call upon all Americans to observe this month with appropriate programs and activities to honor Jewish Americans across the country.”
RESEARCH

Using the Internet and other resources in your classroom and media center, research and respond to the following:

1. Jewish people immigrated to what is now North America from as early as 1654. Research Jewish immigration in the following periods of time: 1654-1776; 1777-1829; 1830-1900; 1901-1919; 1920-1948; 1949-1967; 1968-current times. What countries did the Jewish people emigrate from and what significant events caused immigration during each of the time periods? In what cities in the United States did a majority of the Jewish people settle? Why were these areas selected, and what was life like for a majority of these immigrants?

2. If we are to recognize the accomplishments of a group of people, it is first important to know who they are, as a group. Research and discuss the following: What is Judaism? Who were the first Jews? What beliefs separated them from other groups of the times?

3. Visit the website for the American Jewish Historical Society, www.ajhs.org. The site is broken down into various time periods and includes information in terms of American Jewry. The past comes alive through a gallery of pictures and documents as well as through video connections. Select specific time periods. What did you discover concerning the way in which America’s Jewish population assimilated, contributed, and lived? As a group, what values did they have?

4. Research America’s policy towards immigration of Jews from Europe who were trying to flee the genocide that ultimately claimed the lives of over 6 million Jewish men, women, and children during the Holocaust. Debate the policy and its implications.

5. Throughout the history of Jewish immigration to The United States, a large percentage of immigrants were processed at Ellis Island. Often, immigrants coming through Ellis Island had their names changed by those in charge of processing the new Americans, and this change affected many of the Jewish immigrants who came to America. Research to discover how Jewish Americans began new lives with new identities and how that affected their experiences in making a new life for themselves and their families? Using your research of this famous landmark and its relevance to the Jewish American experience and identity, write a short essay paper outlining what you have learned.

6. Research the topic of anti-Semitism. To what does it refer? What are the root causes of anti-Semitism? How does anti-Semitism in this country reveal itself and to what degree?

7. The Holocaust had a tremendous effect on the Jewish population living in the U.S. during the early 1940’s. That effect has been long lasting until today. Research how modern American Jewish life has changed from that of the early 20th century in light of
the events of the Holocaust. How has American Jewish life transformed since the Holocaust? Present your findings to the class.

8. Jewish Americans have been heavily involved in the arts, literature, and sports. Research all three of these areas of interest and gather as much information as you can on how Jewish Americans have made their mark in these areas.

9. The statistical facts are that less than 2% of the population in the United States are comprised of Jewish people. Research the number of Jewish Americans who have won:
   a. The Nobel Peace Prize
   b. The Pulitzer Prize
   c. The Academy Award(s)

Prepare a paper on these facts to present to the class on the topic, “Great Jewish Achievements.”

**REFLECT, WRITE, CREATE**

The following activities are based on the research completed concerning the contributions of the Jewish people in America.

1. Consider the various contributions of the American Jews. What one contribution do you feel is most vital to you personally? Write a persuasive paper to express your beliefs about the importance of this individual’s work. Create a class “Hall of Fame.”

2. Bring in newspapers and magazines. Search the ads and headlines for references to products/companies that were founded by American Jews e.g. Liz Claiborne clothing, Levi Jeans, Estee Lauder cosmetics, MGM, Macy’s, Steven Speilberg movies, etc. Create a scrapbook to reflect the contributions of these individuals.

3. During the Civil Rights movements of the 20th century, Jewish Americans represented a large portion of those who fought for the rights of others, specifically for African-Americans and for women. In small groups, research some well-known American Jews who have been leaders of Civil Rights and Human Rights movements. Each group will present to the rest of the class the life of one Jewish American who has helped shape the civil liberties of this country and how his or her contributions have made an impact on American society.

4. Jewish Americans have in the sciences, and during the 20th century a number of our Jewish citizens won the Nobel Prize for their contributions to science and medicine. American Jewish scientists continue to make breakthroughs and innovations in all areas of science. Discover as much as you can regarding notable Jewish scientists such as Jonas Salk, for his work in immunization vaccine to cure polio. Divide into groups and choose one scientist and create a multimedia presentation of that scientist’s discoveries.
and contributions to his field. After each presentation, have an open discussion with the entire class about these important Jewish scientists.

5. America’s Jewry has been active in the political arena for well over a century. Now, more than ever, Jewish Americans play a part in the American political process. American Jews span the spectrum of political opinions, both liberal and conservative. Research two influential American Jewish politicians; one conservative, one liberal, and write a paper which highlights and contrasts their political beliefs.

6. The last several decades has granted opportunities to Jewish women in their religious practice that were unheard of at the turn of the 20th century. Just as women now have the right to vote, Jewish women, along with women of other faiths, have begun to take on more responsibilities in the practice of their faith. There are several hundred ordained female rabbis now among Conservative and Reform congregations. Research and discover if there is a female rabbi in your area. Invite her to your class to discuss the idea of women and their role today in Jewish American culture and history leadership. Have a question and answer session after, and be certain that your questions are well thought-out.

7. With the events of the Holocaust still fresh in the minds of its survivors, Jewish Americans, Holocaust survivors particularly, have often worked tirelessly to ensure that other genocides do not go unchallenged. The recent genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan has garnered an enormous amount of attention, much of which is due to the efforts of Jewish American Holocaust victims and their families. Research and make connections between the Holocaust and more recent genocides, such as Darfur or the Bosnian genocide. Are there commonalities among genocides? See the USHMM website www.ushmm.org for interesting topics on this issue. As a class, research and choose a group of people who are even now being oppressed or murdered simply because of their ethnicity or religious beliefs. Organize a class or even school-wide event to benefit the victims of this injustice. Contact your local press and media to cover the event and bring awareness to the events and the victims.

8. Plan a “Reader’s Theatre” on American Jewish History Month. After researching the history of the Jewish community in America, choose five events that you feel had an impact on the American Jewish community; then write a dramatic script describing each event. Choose five students to then each read one of the scripts aloud to the class in a dramatization.

9. The term “mitzvah” in Yiddish (a language made-up of primarily German and Hebrew words which was predominant among European Jews and still flourishes here today) means, “a good deed,” and in the Hebrew it means “a commandment” – so in Judaism, basically one is commanded to perform good deeds or acts of kindness. Many American synagogues, temples and Jewish organizations have started a “Mitzvah Day” where they perform acts of kindness within their communities: serving the elderly, the homeless, and others in need. Have your class create a school-wide “Mitzvah Day” where each of your classmates and schoolmates performs one good deed within the
school and one in the larger community outside of the school. Then report on and
discuss your act and why you feel it was important.

10. The Jews who immigrated to America became strong supporters of their new homeland. Some of the most popular American songs were written by Jewish immigrants. “God Bless America,” for example, was written by Irving Berlin in 1893. Introduce this fact to your school’s music teacher and when planning an assembly for commemoration of American Jewish History Month, include this song. Also include one or two others by American Jewish composers that you research.
**Websites**


[www.amuseum.org/jahf](http://www.amuseum.org/jahf): Jewish-American Hall of Fame. Includes short biographies and video clips of many prominent American Jewish people such as those Jews who helped Columbus, a Revolutionary War patriot, and Houdini. A quiz and virtual tour introduce visitors to American Jews in areas ranging from science to sports, from medicine to music.

[www.350th.org](http://www.350th.org): This website celebrates 350 years of Jewish Life in America. It includes a timeline of American Jewish History and “This Month in Jewish History” where visitors can select a month and see what happened in that month in years past. Also included are special exhibits and documents.


[http://www.jewsinamerica.org](http://www.jewsinamerica.org): The American Jewish experience as seen through photographs, documents and other artifacts. Visitors can view these materials by selecting various periods of time.

[www.jewishheritage.us](http://www.jewishheritage.us): Includes timelines from 1585 as well as chapters in American Jewish history.

[www.jwa.org](http://www.jwa.org): Jewish Women’s Archives. Includes exhibits based upon American Jewish women who have made significant contributions to this country.

[www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org): Includes information about Jewish life, including the American Jewish winners of the Nobel Prizes.

[www.science.co.il/Nobel.asp](http://www.science.co.il/Nobel.asp): Lists Nobel Prize winners and has various ways of sorting names, including nationality.