

Jewish American Heritage

A framework for history, belonging
and academic connection



Fayette County
Public Schools

History

Judaism is one of the world's oldest monotheistic religions, originating over 3,500 years ago in the Middle East (specifically the Land of Israel). It is an ethno-religion, meaning it is both a set of religious beliefs and a shared cultural/ethnic identity.

Important Dates

Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year): Determined by Fall's new moon

Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement): 10 days after Rosh Hashanah

- The holiest day; students will likely fast and be absent.

Hanukkah: (A minor holiday, though highly visible.) starts on the 25th day of a winter month called Kislev

- Kislev is typically in November or December

Passover (Pesach): Starts on a full moon in the spring (Significant dietary restrictions apply this week.)

Shavuot: (Celebrating the giving of the Torah)

Frequently Asked Questions

- **What is the "Torah"?** The Torah refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, but "Torah" is also used broadly to refer to the entire body of Jewish legal and ethical teachings.
- **Is Judaism a race or a religion?** It is an ethno-religion. One can be Jewish through ancestry (ethnicity), conversion (religion), or both.
- **Why do dates change every year?** Judaism follows a luni-solar calendar. Holidays occur on the same day on the Hebrew calendar but "drift" on the standard Gregorian calendar.
- **Does every Jewish person keep "Kosher"?** No. Kosher is (avoiding pork/shellfish or mixing meat and dairy). Observance varies widely from Orthodox (strict) to Reform or Secular (cultural identity).



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Barriers To Belonging

Invisible Barriers

- **The "Saturday" Barrier:** Many school events (prom, games, graduations) are held on Friday nights or Saturdays. For observant students, the Sabbath (Shabbat) begins at sundown Friday, making these events inaccessible.
- **Dietary Isolation:** Cafeteria options often lack Kosher-style choices, leaving students unable to eat with peers.
- **Assumed Responsibility:** Educators often assume Jewish students "know and are willing to speak" about the Holocaust or Israel, putting an unfair "spokesperson" burden on them.

Common Misconceptions

- **"Hanukkah is the Jewish Christmas":** Hanukkah is a minor festival. Elevating it as the "counterpart" to Christmas ignores the major holidays like Yom Kippur.
- **"Judaism is just Christianity without Jesus":** Judaism has its own distinct legal codes, philosophy, and history that exist independently of other faiths.
- **"All Jews are white/European":** There are significant populations of Mizrahi (Middle Eastern), Sephardic (Spanish/North African), and Ethiopian Jews.

Common Microaggressions

- **"You don't look Jewish":** Implies there is a singular "Jewish look."
 - **"Can you explain the situation in the Middle East?":** Assuming a student (or any person) is an expert on or responsible for the politics of Israel.
 - **Jokes about money or greed:** Often excused as "just a joke," these reinforce harmful historical stereotypes.
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Education Connections

Alignment with FCPS Portrait of a Graduate

The study of Jewish heritage and the removal of barriers for Jewish students directly support the five pillars of the FCPS Portrait of a Graduate:

- **Lifelong Learner:** The concept of Tikkun Olam (repairing the world) inspires students to look at community issues and design innovative, service-based solutions to improve the world around them.
- **Civically Engaged and Culturally Responsive :** By navigating discussions around identity, history, and social justice, students learn to articulate their own perspectives while listening empathetically to others, fostering a climate of respectful discourse. Working across religious and cultural differences to achieve a common goal helps students build the cultural competency required to be successful in a global workforce.
- **Reflective and Resilient:** The Jewish tradition of Hevruta (collaborative, inquiry-based study) encourages students to analyze complex texts, challenge assumptions, and view problems from multiple perspectives—the very definition of a critical thinker.
- **Future and Life Ready:** When students see their own culture reflected in the curriculum and feel their "invisible barriers" are removed, they take greater agency in their education and feel empowered to share their unique voices.

KY Standards Alignment

- **Social Studies (8.H.CH.6):** Analyze how fundamental documents and Enlightenment thought (including debates on Jewish emancipation) impacted the development of the U.S.
 - **Civics/World History (HS.WH.CH.1):** Evaluate the development of world religions and their impact on social and political structures.
 - **Reading/ELA (RL.5.6):** Using diverse texts to analyze "perspective" and "cultural experience."
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How to Connect with Families and Communities

Family Connection Strategies

- Invite families to share cultural traditions such as Shabbat rituals, holiday foods, music, storytelling, or family customs.
- Create “Family Heritage Projects” where students explore Jewish identity through family stories, cultural practices, or intergenerational traditions.
- Host multicultural literacy nights featuring Jewish folktales, picture books, and stories highlighting values like kindness (Chesed) and welcoming others (Hachnasat Orchim).
- Encourage caregivers to share how they celebrate holidays such as Hanukkah, Passover, or Rosh Hashanah in age-appropriate ways.

Understanding Identity and Context

Judaism is one of the world’s oldest monotheistic traditions, originating over 3,500 years ago in the Middle East (Land of Israel). It is an ethno-religion, meaning Jewish identity can include both religious practice and shared cultural/ethnic heritage. Families may identify as religious (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform), secular, or cultural—so engagement must avoid assumptions and honor this diversity.

Jewish life is also shaped by a luni-solar calendar, meaning holidays shift on the Gregorian calendar each year. This impacts school attendance, participation, and planning.





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Resources

Primary (K-5)

Focus Areas

Cultural Identity, Shared Values, and Everyday Belonging

Jewish American heritage includes both religious and cultural identity rooted in a history spanning over 3,500 years. At the elementary level, connection should center on shared values, storytelling, and inclusive community practices rather than complex theological or geopolitical topics.

Recommended Resources

- PJ Library books focusing on Jewish values, traditions, and family life
- Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins by Eric Kimmel
- Jewish folktales and children's story collections
- Jewish Museum or cultural education resources (local or virtual)

Classroom & School Inclusion Tips

- Represent Jewish life year-round—not only during winter holidays or Holocaust remembrance units.
- Include visuals that reflect diverse Jewish identities (Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, etc.).
- Learn and correctly pronounce student and family names.
- Be mindful of scheduling conflicts with Shabbat (Friday sundown–Saturday sundown).
- Avoid framing Hanukkah as the “Jewish Christmas.”
- Ensure holiday instruction includes multiple cultural traditions throughout the year.

Family Event Ideas

- Jewish Heritage Family Literacy Night
 - Cultural Values Storytelling Workshop (Kindness, Community, Justice)
 - Multicultural Holiday & Traditions Showcase
 - Family Story Quilt or Heritage Wall Project
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Secondary (6-12)

Focus Areas: Identity, History, Social Justice, and Critical Thinking

At the secondary level, engagement should deepen understanding of Jewish identity as an ethno-religion while supporting students in exploring history, resilience, antisemitism, and civic dialogue through respectful inquiry.

Recommended Resources

- Facing History and Ourselves (Holocaust education, antisemitism, identity)
- Institute for Curriculum Services (ICS) non-religious Jewish history resources
- Jewish Virtual Library and cultural heritage organizations
- Literature: The Diary of Anne Frank, Night by Elie Wiesel, contemporary Jewish poetry and essays
- Jewish educational frameworks such as Hevruta (paired inquiry learning)

Classroom & School Inclusion Tips

- Use trauma-informed practices when teaching Holocaust history or discussing antisemitism and global conflict.
- Do not place responsibility on Jewish students to explain or represent Israel, Middle East politics, or Jewish history.
- Recognize Jewish identity as both religious and cultural, with diverse perspectives on practice (Orthodox, Reform, secular, etc.).
- Incorporate structured discussion protocols (Socratic Seminar, Hevruta-style dialogue) for respectful debate.
- Avoid isolating Jewish content to tragedy-based instruction only.

Family Event Ideas

- Jewish Identity, History, and Human Rights Panel Discussion
- Oral History & Family Heritage Digital Storytelling Showcase
- Cultural Arts Night (music, literature, and visual storytelling)
- Community Dialogue: Identity, Belonging, and Respectful Discourse Forum

Best Practices for Schools

Communication

- Ask families about preferred communication methods and levels of religious/cultural observance.
- Provide translation or interpretation support when needed.
- Communicate school calendars early, including major Jewish holidays (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Passover).

Representation Matters

- Integrate Jewish voices, literature, and cultural contributions throughout the school year—not only during holidays or crises.
- Highlight Jewish contributions to science, law, literature, music, and civic life.
- Ensure curriculum reflects both historical depth and contemporary Jewish life.

Relationship Building

- Build trust through consistent, respectful, and proactive communication.
- Recognize that some families may have lived experiences shaped by antisemitism or migration history.
- Avoid assuming a single “Jewish experience” or identity.

Equity & Belonging

- Create classroom spaces where Jewish students feel safe expressing identity without being singled out or stereotyped.
- Address antisemitic language, stereotypes, and microaggressions immediately (e.g., money stereotypes, “you don’t look Jewish”).
- Ensure students are not overburdened as cultural or political representatives.

Important Reminders for Educators

- Judaism is an ethno-religion, not a single racial, cultural, or political identity.
- Not all Jewish families observe the same level of religious practice (kosher dietary laws, Shabbat, etc.).
- Jewish holidays follow a luni-solar calendar, so dates shift each year.
- Avoid assuming knowledge, expertise, or political responsibility from Jewish students regarding global events.
- Jewish American heritage includes deep cultural, historical, and civic contributions to U.S. society and should be recognized beyond stereotypes or crisis-centered narratives.