

Division of Academics, Department of Social Sciences

Jewish American Heritage Month May 2020

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 states”:

“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 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.”

Discussion / Resources /Activities

AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY MONTH May 2020

RESEARCH

Using the links found below as a starting point, research and respond to the following:

1. Since May is American Jewish History Month and we are going to recognize the accomplishments of this group of people, it is first important to know who they are as a group. Research and discuss the following questions: What does it mean to be Jewish? What is Judaism? Who were the first Jews in America? What are the cultural and religious beliefs of the Jewish people? www.ajhs.org
2. Throughout the history of Jewish immigration to The United States, a large percentage of immigrants were processed at Ellis Island. Research this famous landmark and its relevance to the Jewish American experience. 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. How do you think that experience of new names that these new Jewish Americans were given also affected their experiences in making a new life for themselves and their families? <http://www.jewsinamerica.org>
3. The synagogue has historically been one of the most important aspects of Jewish life. Research to discover the first established synagogue in the United States. Why was the establishment of this religious and social institution important to American Jewish people of that time? www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org
4. *Tradition* is a theme which resonates throughout Judaism and Jewish life. Research several traditions and holidays celebrated by many American Jews and the symbolism and history behind each. www.ajhs.org (Search Traditions in Search Link)
5. The Holocaust had a tremendous effect on the Jewish population living in America during the early 1940's. That effect has been 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. www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org
6. Research the Jewish tradition of *Tzedakah* which is a Hebrew word that refers to the idea of giving back to the world through charity. Discuss the importance of the concept of *Tzedakah* to the Jewish people, and how *Tzedakah* has affected and continues to affect the United States. One example could be the life of actor Paul Newman, who was of Jewish descent, and whose charitable donations have exceeded \$250 million toward a multitude of causes including education. www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org

7. 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. Jews have been active in the military in America since the 17th century. Most dramatically is the response of Jewish young men and women to volunteer during World War II. Research the National Museum of American Jewish Military History. Use their website as a starting place to research some of the Jewish soldiers of WWII and their contributions. Make a list of these for discussion purposes. www.amuseum.org/jah; www.science.co.il/Nobel.asp
8. Jewish women have always been a strong and influential force in American business, the arts, and cultural life in American society. Research and choose five of these outstanding women in American Jewish history and list their major contributions to American society. www.jwa.org ; www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org
9. Anti-Semitism is a prejudice which Jewish populations around the world have battled for centuries. Today there unfortunately What are the root causes of anti-Semitism? How has anti-Semitism affected the Jewish communities of this country? Research anti-Semitism in America. www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org
10. American English has been greatly affected over the years by the many immigrant groups which have settled here. *Yiddish*, a language spoken primarily by Eastern European Jews prior to the Holocaust, has been one of many languages which have influenced American English. Research words such as *kosher*, *schmooze*, *shtick*, or *tchotchke*, to find out how these words are used today and note how the language of Yiddish has affected the English-speaking community at large? www.aihs.org ([Search "Yiddish in Search Link"](#))