

Lesson Plans for American Religious History

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While material recovered from archival research at the College of Charleston Library's Special Collections will appear in my forthcoming book, the Privilege and Prejudice NEH Summer Institute had the greatest impact on my teaching. I will highlight how it has changed my lesson plans for the Judaism section of my American Religious History course below.

This course is listed at the 200-level and is open to all students without prerequisites. I teach at North Dakota State University, where most students have little to no knowledge about Judaism, so basic information about the religion must be conveyed in addition to content on the Jewish American experience. Class periods last 75 minutes.

Judaism Day 1: Introduction to Judaism in America

Students are asked to begin reading *Rachel Calof's Story* prior to class.

Class begins with a lecture offering a basic summary of Jewish history, beliefs, and practices, framing Judaism as a religion (for now). The class speculates what practices might result from a rigorous interpretation of Sabbath regulations before looking at the related Mishnah. I ask students to imagine the challenges these limitations pose for modern, non-agrarian people. From there, we transition to Jewish life in the United States.

The NEH Institute gave me ideas on how to encourage students to think about the development of Reform Judaism within an American context, instead of repeating a more generic activity from my World Religions class as I have done in the past. After the preceding conversation, I will hand out the "Memorial to the President and Members of the Adjunta of KKBE" from December 23, 1824 and ask students to discern their demands. I'll explain the subsequent events of the synagogue splitting and reforming.

Then, using data from the 1833 [Mapping Jewish Charleston](#), I will assign small groups or pairs of students to read about different Charleston Jews, discuss their occupations/background, and speculate why they might have joined the reform group or refused. I will end the class with a summary of the Pittsburgh Platform and related events and discuss the changes brought about by subsequent immigration waves and the development of Conservative, Reconstructionist, etc. groups.

Judaism Day 2: Jews on the American Frontier

Students must complete *Rachel Calof's Story* before class and bring a list of the ways in which frontier life challenged the family's ability to practice their religion.

Students will first compare their lists and share general impressions of the book in pairs and then with the class as a whole, writing the challenges on the board. I will then distribute letters from the [Isaac Leeser Digital Repository](#) and the [Isaac Mayer Wise Archive](#) to show additional concerns of Jews around the country. I will ask them to add points to our list on the board when they have finished reading the primary sources, and we will review them together.

While this day has previously shifted directly to a lecture on anti-semitism, I will now add a 10-15 minute lecture on Judaism and the economy, emphasizing the role of peddlers and dry good stores in the post-bellum South and rural America. I will reinforce aspects of the previous day's Mapping Jewish Charleston activity by pulling up the section of the 1910 map that highlights the businesses on King Street and tell the story of a few of the Jewish

entrepreneurs (The Karesh family, the Glassners, Sam Banov are useful since the latter stories are tied to the African American community and the Karesh bio has a funny line about the family cow). Aided by knowledge gained on our excellent walking tour on King Street, I will explain how you can still see evidence of these businesses on the street today. This lecture complements the Calof book because her family, like most of the Jewish agricultural pioneers, eventually abandoned their farm and opened a dry goods store.

I will conclude with my established lecture/discussion on antisemitism. Adding the interlude on the economy will smooth what used to be an abrupt shift from seemingly unrelated topics. The lecture includes plentiful images (primarily public notices and political cartoons) that we discuss as a group. I will regretfully have to investigate the most recent statistics on rising antisemitic attacks prior to this lecture. I will mention the relations forged between the Charleston AME church (the attack on which we discuss earlier in the term) and the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, as the former's pastor mentioned this during our visit.

Judaism Day 3: Contemporary Jewish Culture*

Our unit on Judaism ends on a lighter note and emphasizes that Jewish identity is more than religious adherence. Small groups of students read different articles on contemporary Jewish material culture at home and then teach the material to the rest of the class. I tell students to come to class with a list of the five most important points they learned from the article. Students also review the results of the [2013 PEW study on American Judaism](#) before class.

At the beginning of class, I give students ten to fifteen minutes to meet with everyone who read the same material culture article. They must decide which points to share with the class, gather images to show the class (or plan to show images from the article on the classroom's doc cam), and, with any remaining time, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the article. Groups take turns presenting their articles and fielding questions from the class, and then we discuss the articles' major themes and how they relate to Jewish identity in the United States as described in the PEW study.

Articles and chapters I've used in the past include Rachel Gross's "Draydel Salad: The Serious Business of Jewish Food and Fun in the 1950s" and "People of the Picture Book: PJ Library and American Jewish Religion," Hanna Miller's "Identity Takeout: How American Jews Made Chinese Food their Ethnic Cuisine," Jeffrey Shandler and Aviva Weintraub's "Santa, Shmanta': Greeting Cards for the December Dilemma," and Jonathan Sarna's "How Matzah Became Square: Manischewitz and the Development of Machine-Made Matzah in the United States."

Additionally: Primary sources obtained in the summer institute, such as "A Jewish View on Segregation," the New Orleans mayor's remarks on the removal of Confederate monuments, and pro- and anti-slavery editorials will be used within my American Religious History and/or my Religion and Politics course.

* This lesson plan remains unchanged from previous years, but I will add a piece on Southern Jewish cuisine to highlight the effect of regionalism within American Jewish culture.

Improved Outcomes

- Students' picture of American Judaism will be more diverse regionally. Judaism in the American South was not previously discussed or studied.
- Students' understanding of the development of Reform Judaism will expand to include events in Charleston.
- The individual histories found within Mapping Jewish Charleston will personalize the history and make it more memorable.
- The active engagement with new technologies and primary sources will increase the likelihood that students will truly learn and absorb the material.