



ACTIVITY

Who are the Jews?

Materials Needed

- Large poster for all to see, with list of terms (see #1 below) and for listing ideas during the discussion
- Scrap paper and pens
- Copies of piece by Smolenskin (see #7)

Time Needed

45-60 minutes.

Goal

The aim of this activity is to provide opportunity for the students to define the entire Jewish collective of which they are a part – what, or who, are the Jews?

Before you Get Started

Look at the list of Enduring Understandings:

- Judaism is a civilization, and not primarily a religion.
- A civilization is constituted by its history, literature, language, social organizations, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetics and values. All of these elements form a civilization.
- Jewish communities share the content of the civilization and the drive for sustaining it, but they also each bring to the table their unique local perspective and interpretation, which in turn contributes to and enriches the collective global civilization.
- The local and global dimensions of Jewish Peoplehood, as perceived through the prism of developing and sustaining Jewish civilization, represent two sides of the same coin.
- The work of building and strengthening Jewish civilization at the local Jewish community level is central to the future of Jewish peoplehood.
- The contribution of every Jew in every community can be significant to the development of the Jewish People's collective enterprise.

Which one would you like to emphasize through this activity?

Directions for Activity

1. Give the students a list of the following terms:

| | |
|---------------------------|----------------|
| • Religion | • Ethnic Group |
| • Nation | • Civilization |
| • Religious Nation/People | • Community |
| • Culture | |

2. Ask them to think about how they would define the Jewish collective. Who or what are the Jews? They should choose the term that most defines the group to which they feel they belong as Jews. They can choose either one item from the list or an alternative definition for the collective that is not listed here. They do need to focus on the primary definition that they identify with. They should take a few minutes to examine why they have chosen that particular definition for the Jewish collective, and how they see themselves as fitting into it. They should also add if there are

any conditions that would remove or exclude them from the collective according to that definition. For example, they may write:

I feel that the Jews are a culture, because ... I think that I fit into the cultural definition because I do ... or observe ... etc. If I stopped observing ... or if I converted to another religion, it would take me out of the Jewish culture.

3. Let them share their responses in pairs or small groups, and question each other.
4. Bring everyone together and ask some of the groups to present what they have written. Challenge them if there are any contradictions in the positions that people have taken. For example, in relation to the above statement, you may ask why conversion to another religion would take a person out of a group that is not defined by religion but rather by culture. The aim here is to get the class to think about the complexities of these issues.
5. After hearing some of the positions in detail, list on the board each person's choice. How many have defined themselves according to each definition? What does that say about the class? Are there any collective groups in the community (schools, youth movements, adult organizations etc.) in which they think that a different result might be obtained? Which groups? Why?
6. Write a separate list of the things that the students think would take them out of the collective, and discuss it. Is it, in fact, possible to take yourself out of the Jewish collective? Does conversion take you out? Does being a 'Jew for Jesus' take you out? Does acting in a treacherous way against other Jews take you out? Does acting in an immoral way take you out? You may like to link up the answers with the positions taken in the previous exercise regarding the criteria for living a Jewish life.
7. Now hand out the following piece for the group's consideration. It was written in the mid-1870s by Peretz Smolenskin, a pre-Zionist ideologist of Jewish nationalism who had an enormous effect in Eastern Europe of the late-nineteenth century. We have chosen Smolenskin because he deals directly with the issues that we have mentioned, not because we feel that the students should necessarily accept his position. His essential argument, presented in this piece, was that the Jews must continue to see themselves as a nation open to Jews of all religious outlooks. Religious observance was a criterion neither for belonging to the Jewish collective nor for being seen to live a Jewish life. The essential criterion for a Jewish life was acceptance of the nation. Only a Jew who sinned against his/her nation should be seen as outside the collective and not living a Jewish life.

The Jewish people has outlived all others because it has always regarded itself as a people – a spiritual nation. Without exception, its sages and writers, its prophets and the authors of its prayers, have always called it a people. Clearly, therefore, this one term has sufficient power to unite those who are dispersed all over the world. Jews of different countries regard and love one another as members of the same people because they remember that the tie that binds them did not begin yesterday. It is four thousand years old...Any sensitive person must feel that for four thousand years we have been brothers and children of one people. How can I sin against hundreds of generations and betray this brotherhood [by failing to acknowledge the rest of the Jewish people as mine]?

...Thinking people understand that this unity is the secret of our strength and vitality. But such unity can only come from a fraternal feeling, from a national sentiment that makes everyone born a Jew declare: I am a son of this people...Those who may abandon some or even many of our religious practices, will nonetheless keep a share in the inheritance of Israel...No matter what his sins against religion, every Jew belongs to his people as long as he does not betray it...

[There are those that say that we are united by our faith and our religion.] This proposition does not stand up under analysis...If many begin to disobey the laws of religion, [according to this position] how is the sense of Jewish unity to be maintained? These [irreligious] Jews will simply declare that the tie between them and the rest of the children of Israel has been severed. Having thrown off the yoke of religious discipline, they will regard themselves as excluded from a community which is united by it alone. Are we to exclude such people from the community?

- Peretz Smolenskin, *It Is Time To Plant*

8. The group should try to understand the idea that Smolenskin is trying to develop. What are the group's views regarding his argument? Do they agree or disagree? Whichever position they adopt, try to challenge it. Once again, the idea here is to push the individuals of the group to develop their own way of responding to the ideas being presented.

This activity was originally written by Steve Israel, for 'Connecting to Community', Peoplehood resources commissioned by the Jewish Agency for Israel.



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IT IS TIME TO PLANT

by Peretz Smolenskin

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