

# Expressing Diversity in Jewish Identity: Blending In and Standing Out

## Overview

### About This Lesson

This is the second lesson in a three-lesson series highlighting the historical and contemporary experiences of Jews of color, Sephardic Jews, and Mizrahi Jews while also considering the impact of antisemitism and “othering” on people who share these Jewish identities. This two-day lesson will use the story of Purim as a frame to examine how Jews have preserved and protected their identities and culture in dominant societies by choosing when to blend in and when to stand out. We will start with ourselves and consider our own multiple identities and the external pressures that influence the ways in which we blend in and stand out in a dominant culture. Using a short film by a teen filmmaker as a launching point, we will then consider the risks and benefits of preserving a minority identity in a majority culture. After a Purim text study, we will gain a general understanding of the history of Mizrahi Jews, with particular focus on their successes and challenges in terms of inclusion in the dominant Jewish narrative. Finally, we will think about how we can create a welcoming community for all types of Jews within our own communities.

### Essential Questions

- What tensions can arise when we are asked to classify our identities?
- How does antisemitism impact or influence the tension between assimilation/ acculturation and cultural resistance/preservation historically and today?
- How can we expand the Jewish narrative to include a diversity of Jewish identities?
- How can we dispel assumptions from both within and outside the Jewish community about Jewish identity?

### Guiding Questions

- What are some ways that multiple identities can coexist?
- What does it mean to expand the dominant Jewish narrative?
- How might antisemitism impact an individual’s sense of safety in sharing their Jewish identity?
- What insight does the story of Purim provide about blending in for self-preservation and standing out to combat hatred and bigotry?

### Learning Objectives

- Reflect on our own multiple identities.
- Explore the complexity of identity and factors that lead to the choice to blend in or stand out.

- Celebrate and validate Jewish cultural traditions.
- Examine the effects of antisemitism on the expression of identity.
- Consider the impacts of upholding a single Jewish narrative.
- Draw connections between themes of Purim and contemporary Jewish identity.

### What's Included

This lesson uses the following student materials. Access the handouts in this [Google Folder](#).

- Reading: [One Identity, Multiple Belongings](#)
- Video: [Still](#) by Canadian teen filmmaker Elijah Marche
- Handout: **Blank Mask Template**
- Handout: **Historical Context and Excerpts from the Purim Story**
- Handout: **Outline of the Purim Story**
- Reading: **A Brief Overview of Mizrahi Jews**
- Video: [Sephardim and Mizrahim Explanatory Video](#)

### Additional Context & Background

When educators tackle hard topics like antisemitism in a Jewish educational setting, it is not uncommon for students, particularly in middle school, to ask, “Why does everyone hate us?” As educators, we need to make space for narratives that provide a counterbalance to the long and often painful history of persecution that Jews have endured while defending and maintaining Jewish identity within dominant cultures. Indeed, amplifying the diversity of and pride in Jewish identity is a form of resistance to contemporary antisemitism today. This can be achieved by providing space for students to look both inward, at their own complex Jewish identities, and outward, at representations of Jewishness beyond their own identities.

Living as a minority often necessitates some amount of acculturation with the dominant society for social and civic acceptance, and sometimes even for survival. This lesson allows students to consider how threats toward Jews affect an individual's decision to express or suppress their Jewish identity. The story of Purim challenges students to consider what factors contribute to their choices to blend in and stand out in their daily lives.

### Preparing to Teach

#### A Note to Teachers

##### 1. Validating the Faces of World Jewry

These lessons are intended to bring awareness to Jewish diversity. However, it is possible that some students may feel self-conscious and worry about how their peers or teachers may view their public or private Jewish identity.

Understanding modern Jewish identity requires an intentional departure from the commonly accepted twentieth-century narrative that defined Jewishness in terms of

religious observance and as an outcome of formal Jewish education.<sup>1</sup> Today, Jewish peoplehood and identity exist beyond religious and educational affiliations and incorporate multiple intersectional identities. Today's Jews live in an increasingly complex world that demands broad-minded thinking about Jewish identity. In "[Creating Support Structures for Jewish Diversity](#)," Jewish educators Yael Krieger, Roni Ben-David, and Lauren Cook reflect further on the significant outcomes to be gained by including and providing diverse and complex representations of Jewish identity in our curriculum:

We continue to audit our Jewish studies curriculum, looking for how to more fully present the variety of expressions of Jewish peoplehood, which includes representations of Jewish men and women from a variety of heritages. How can we amplify the voices of different types of Jews? It is vital that we provide our students with "mirrors" to see themselves and ["windows"] to see other [Jewish] stories/histories. . . . When done well, students are given many opportunities to process difficult experiences; feel affirmed in having felt pressure to prove their Jewishness or choose between different parts of themselves; see that they are not alone, that they have the power to lift up others and be lifted up; feel equal claim to their Jewish identity even if it isn't rooted in lineage; and confront the assumption that Jews of color are part of one uniform group, that they only exist within binary of "Jews of color" or Jew. Moreover, they can see themselves as potential leaders in the Jewish community with the insights and self-awareness that our community must value and learn from.<sup>2</sup>

Modeling openness to and validation of all of your students' different expressions of Jewish identity will help to reinforce and validate diverse Jewish expression and identity.

Before teaching the following activities, consider revisiting your classroom norms with your students or [creating a class contract](#) together if you have not done so already. Your contract should also make it clear that, while you encourage the expression of different viewpoints and diverse voices, members of your community are responsible for maintaining an environment that respects the dignity and humanity of all. Consider how you and your students can respond if someone in your class violates your norms—for instance, by communicating and expressing judgment about how a peer expresses their Jewish identity or any part of their identity.

## 2. Preparing for Upsetting Content

These lessons trace the themes of Purim through the ways we navigate our identities in a non-Jewish society today. In teaching difficult content, we encourage educators to take all necessary steps to move safely into and out of the lesson within your given time constraints. Explain to students ahead of the lesson that, while they may be deeply familiar with our Purim story, for some, Jews narrowly escaping a slaughter may feel different in light of recent antisemitic terrorist attacks or other hate crimes close to their own communities. Additionally, the short film *Still* in Activity 2 of Day 1 may be upsetting for some of your students, as we are asked to bear witness to the aftermath of a violent

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<sup>1</sup> Jon A. Levisohn and Ari Y. Kelman, eds., *Beyond Jewish Identity: Rethinking Concepts and Imagining Alternatives* (Academic Studies Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Yael Krieger, Roni Ben-David, and Lauren Cook, "[Creating Support Structures for Jewish Diversity](#)" (*In These Times* journal, February 7, 2019).

antisemitic attack. There may be a variety of empathetic and sympathetic reactions as the protagonist contemplates how to process this attack and responds to it.

These conversations may stir strong emotions in students and may end without closure. The guide [Fostering Civil Discourse](#) includes practices and resources to establish the sort of classroom environment that increases safety and productivity when having such conversations. If you have already created the appropriate classroom culture for hard conversations, it is still essential to refresh students on [contracting](#) and properly prepare them to have complex conversations. Students may respond differently to the materials. You might invite your students to check in with you privately if they are anxious for any reason about engaging with this material.

## Lesson Plan

### Activities

#### Day 1

##### Pework

**Note:** Before beginning today's activities, pass out the **Blank Mask Template**. Ask students to keep the template handy, as they will write notes, words, or phrases on both the inside and outside of the mask.

If students have not previously filled out the [Home Indicators of Cultural Identity Chart](#), begin by asking them to complete that exercise so they can reflect on their multiple identities. Allow the whole class a brief period to share out some of these findings if you have not done so previously.

#### Activity 1: Belonging to More Than One Identity

Have students read [One Identity, Multiple Belongings](#) and respond to the prompts at the end of the reading, either in [journals](#) or small groups.

#### Activity 2: Blending In and Standing Out

First, with your class, view the short film [Still](#) by Canadian teen filmmaker Elijah Marche. After viewing, give students a few minutes to silently process the film by filling out a [Head, Heart, Conscience](#) entry in their journals.

Ask students if anyone would like to share some of their responses.

Next, pose these two questions to students. They may answer in small groups, using the [Think-Pair-Share](#) strategy, or as a whole class.

1. Why do you think the main character in the film took off their kippah (head covering)?
2. Why do you think the main character replaces the kippah on their head?

If students are ready to dig deeper, consider adding these questions in small groups:

1. How might experiencing antisemitism impact the way the protagonist views their Jewish identity?
2. Just as the protagonist appears reaffirmed in their identity after seeing their sister's commitment when she is practicing for the seder, what or who reaffirms your Jewish identity?

After students share their responses, if they have not already identified this, make sure you note that one central motif we want students to notice is the theme of blending in and standing out. *Marche* explores how encountering or being the recipient of an antisemitic act, in this case a violent one, can influence a person to consider blending into the dominant culture for the sake of their own safety. Through the film, *Marche* also considers how we reaffirm and validate our Jewish identity in the face of antisemitism.

In their journals, ask students to reflect on times when they want to blend in (or simply do blend in, regardless of intention) and times when they want to stand out (or simply do stand out, regardless of intention). Invite students to talk about antisemitism or external pressures that might make them question their sense of self. They can simply list the occasions, circumstances, and environments that apply.

### Activity 3: Closure

Ask students to take out their **Blank Mask Templates**.

The outside of the mask represents the ways in which we blend in or attempt to blend in (e.g., dress, speech, behavior, practices). The inside of the mask represents the parts of us that stand out when or if we reveal them in our society (e.g., beliefs, practices, speech, visible markers of our identities).

Have students select a few words or phrases from any of today's journal entries that represent standing out and write these on the inside of the mask. Have them select a few words or phrases from the journal entries that represent blending in and write these on the outside of the mask. Remind students to bring their masks with them on Day 2 of this lesson.

## Day 2

Educators may want to include this framing at the beginning of today's lesson.

A common thematic motif of Purim is the hidden and the revealed. In the first activity of Day 2, we explore the reasons why Esther both hid and then subsequently revealed her Jewish identity in the course of the Purim story. After the Purim text study, we will gain a general understanding of the history of Mizrahi Jews. Finally, we will think about how we can create a welcoming community for all types of Jews within our own communities. Whether our Jewish community is perceived as homogenous or diverse, we recognize that the Ashkenazi tradition from Western Europe is the Jewish narrative most often expressed and understood in the United States—by non-Jews in particular but also in many American Jewish communities. While we might like to believe that stereotyping is something that we only experience from outside of our Jewish communities, “othering” happens within our communities as well. As you move through today's material, consider what kinds of othering we do within our own community and what ways we encourage inclusivity.

The questions we will keep in mind throughout this lesson are:

- Who are the people, traditions, and rituals we immediately “see” in the dominant Jewish stories we adopt and share, and what people, traditions, and rituals often get “hidden” or marginalized by this dominant narrative?
- In what ways do we ask people to blend or fit into our dominant narratives?
- What can we do to make people feel comfortable and proud to stand out and share expressions of their Jewish identity that are different from dominant expressions?

### Activity 1: Text Study: Blending In and Standing Out in the Story of Purim

If your class is unfamiliar with the Purim story or needs a review, consider the entire text on [Sefaria](#) or provide an **Outline of the Purim Story**. Purim takes place during the fifth century BCE, when many Jews lived in Persia following the Babylonian exile of Jews from the land of Israel.

Provide the handout **Historical Context and Excerpts from the Purim Story** or share it digitally with students.

Have students focus on the underlined verses or phrases to answer the following questions in their journals or with a partner:

1. From what you already know about the Purim story, why did Esther initially hide her identity? What factors contributed to Esther wanting to blend in? On the outside of their mask templates, ask students to write a word or phrase from the text that shows blending in.
2. What factors contributed to Esther courageously deciding to stand out? On the inside of their masks, ask students to write a word or phrase from the text that shows standing out.

Explain to students that Esther, who could have “flown under the radar” and blended in with the majority population, reveals her identity and saves the Jewish people from destruction. In doing so, she saves herself from having to live in a way that erases her Jewish identity and past, but she puts her life on the line. As a result of her courageous act, she proudly passes on her culture and religion to her children. Today, Esther’s descendants would be identified as Mizrahi. In the next activity, we will explore the history of Mizrahi Jews.

## Activity 2 : Expanding the Jewish Narrative

**Transition:** Both non-Jewish communities and Jewish communities often come up with a single narrative about what Jews and Judaism look like. The unintended impact of creating “single stories” is that non-dominant Jewish identities, traditions, and stories are often excluded.

First, ask students to read, **A Brief Overview of Mizrahi Jews**, which provides background on Mizrahi Jewish identity and history.

Next, watch this [Sephardim and Mizrahim explanatory video](#), beginning at 3:40 and ending at 9:07. Encourage students to watch without taking notes because the pace of the film is fast and a lot of information is conveyed rapidly.

In small groups, ask students to discuss the following questions:

- Why was it so hard for Israel’s Ashkenazi founders to accept and incorporate Mizrahi Jews and their culture?
- What are some of the ways that Mizrahi Jews were forced or encouraged to assimilate into Ashkenazi culture in the early years of the Israeli state?
- What forces enabled change and social inclusion in Israel?
- What connections, if any, might you make to the Jewish communities to which you belong?
- How might we continue to work toward inclusion and celebration of diverse identities in Jewish communities today?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of using labels like Ashkenazi and Sephardi or Mizrahi?

### Activity 3: Exploring Holiday Foods to Reveal the Diversity of Jewish Identity

Read the section on hamantaschen together from this [article on Purim foods](#) from My Jewish Learning.

Next, using the [jigsaw](#) teaching strategy, divide the class into “expert groups” and assign one food per group from those listed in the “Purim Foods” article. Each group should take notes on:

- the primary ingredients of their assigned food
- its geographical origins
- any other cultural variations of the dish mentioned

Next, regroup students to form their “teaching groups.” Ask students to take turns sharing their new expertise on a specific Purim dish. After each member has shared their findings, take a poll within the group as to how familiar members are with the various Purim foods.

- Which food did everyone know about?
- Which food did only some students know about?
- Was there a food that was not familiar to anyone?

Finally, engage in a whole-class debrief of the Jigsaw activity. Below are questions you may wish to use in this discussion.

1. Depending on the makeup of our community, some of our Jewish stories may feature more prominently than other Jewish stories. Which region’s or countries’ Purim traditions do you think feature more prominently in our school community? Why is that?
2. What does the significance of Purim teach us about the tension involved in blending in and standing out when living as a minority in a dominant culture?
3. What does the significance of Purim teach us about how we tell our own Jewish story about Jews and Judaism around the world and in our own communities?

### Activity 4: Closure

Share this set of framing questions with students before they engage in a final mask activity. Give students a moment to think about their answers to the questions.

Think back to blending in and standing out. How might someone in our Jewish community feel who experiences or expresses Jewish identity differently from the dominant Jewish narrative? How might we accidentally “other” this person when we share dominant rituals and traditions without acknowledging that there are other experiences and expressions? How might we better hold up and validate their Jewish story so that we ultimately tell a more complete Jewish story?

Next, provide the following fill-in-the-blank sentence for students and ask them to complete it by writing the words they supply to finish the statement, or the whole statement, anywhere on their masks:

*With my \_\_\_\_\_ (mouth, eyes, ears, hands, heart, feet), I can \_\_\_\_\_ to expand our Jewish story.*

### Extension Activity

#### Imagery Expressing the Diversity of Jewish Identity

Using images that you have asked students ahead of time to bring to class or images you have curated for them (below are options you may wish to use), engage students in a [gallery walk](#) to visually explore Jewish diversity. Using the [See, Think, Wonder](#) teaching strategy, provide students with sticky notes to record their thoughts and post them around each picture.

- a. [Yemenite Jewish bride and groom](#)
- b. [Mimouna](#) – post-Passover Sephardic/Moroccan tradition
- c. Persian food: [gondi](#) and [ghormeh sabzi](#)
- d. [Egyptian funnel cakes](#)
- e. [Tunisian synagogue](#)
- f. [Iranian Jewish girls lighting candles](#)
- g. [Tik](#) – Iraqi Torah
- h. [Dabo](#) – Ethiopian Jewish bread, Beta Israel Jewish community
- i. Jewish Yemenite breads – [kubaneh](#), Shabbat [jachnun](#), [malawach](#)
- j. Spanish and Egyptian [sofrito](#)
- k. Moroccan-style [seder plate](#)
- l. [Yemenite](#) candlesticks
- m. [Bene Israel Jews](#) from India's Jewish community
- n. [Bucharian kippah](#) from central Asian Jewish community
- o. [Yemenite kippah](#)
- p. [Moroccan sfenj donuts](#)
- q. [Sephardic bimuelos](#) (donuts)
- r. Yemenite tallit [fringe knots](#)