

Teaching Young Learners with the C3 Framework

More than Hanukkah and the Holocaust: Teaching About Judaism in Elementary School

Amy Allen

The practices and beliefs of Judaism are observed worldwide. Judaism predates both Christianity and Islam, and practitioners of Judaism are regarded for their perseverance despite millennia of persecution and marginalization. Judaism is often recognized as both a religion and a culture due to historical circumstances that alienated Jews from dominant cultural forums. But despite its long history, Judaism is seldom taught outside of lessons that center on one of two contexts: the Holocaust or Hanukkah. But both Hanukkah and the Holocaust should be situated within a broader context, and teaching about Judaism should be done in a manner that centers conversations on practices, beliefs, and defining elements of the religion itself.

The limited instruction about Judaism outside of these two contexts demonstrates a highly limited perspective about religion in the United States. Religious illiteracy can breed intolerance¹ and spark prejudice that leads to antagonism and violence. In October 2018, a deadly attack on the Jewish community in Pennsylvania killed eleven people and injured six more,² and comments by Kanye in October 2022 led to an increase in antisemitic events in Los Angeles.³ However, this intolerance can be diminished through a non-devotional approach to teaching about religion in all grades, including elementary.⁴ Unfortunately, many education professionals feel unprepared to teach religious literacy.⁵ In conjunction with the National Council for the Social Studies, the American Academy of Religion published *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K–12 Public Schools in the United States*⁶ which outlines best practices and provides examples of what religious studies might look like in elementary school. These guides

show it is not only possible to engage in religious studies with children, but for the success of cultural diversity initiatives, it is also critical to familiarize children with varying religious faiths of various individuals and groups.⁷

What Makes Judaism Unique?

Below is an outline detailing one example of what religious studies might look like in an upper elementary social studies classroom when combined with text sets and classroom discussion strategies, providing both an annotated text set (Table 1) and an IDM Blueprint (Figure 1). This two-week unit, requiring about 45 minutes per day, employs the use of the IDM to guide students through an inquiry to learn about the intricacies of Judaism. Specifically, students are asked to consider the compelling question, “What makes Judaism unique?” A key component of any inquiry designed with the IDM is that the compelling question should be arguable.⁸ In

Though antisemitic hate crimes have been on the rise for the past decade, this number increased dramatically in October 2023 in response to the Israel-Hamas War. As current events continue to unfold—during present conflicts and in the future—teachers should be aware of meaningful ways to increase student understanding of other religions.

other words, a successful IDM has multiple possible answers, or argument stems, which can be supported by evidence gained through the inquiry. For this compelling question, potential argument stems might include the following:

- The cultural beliefs and practices common for many Jews are different from my own culture.
- Judaism is unique because Jews celebrate a unique set of holidays to remember important events that have shaped their culture.
- People of all genders who practice Judaism have had unique experiences from other religions and also from other types of Jews.
- Religious persecution has shaped the Jewish religion into a practice with unique aspects that are not found in other cultures.

Each compelling and supporting question included in the IDM is connected to one or more picture books that deepen understandings of what it means to be Jewish. Students use these texts to develop their own arguments to answer the questions embedded throughout the inquiry. Throughout the lesson, students are asked to engage in formative performance tasks, but teachers are also encouraged to intentionally facilitate classroom discussions using structured discussion strategies. The inquiry culminates by asking students to think critically about why Jews have been discriminated against in the past and to speak out against current acts of persecution.

Outline of Lesson Activities⁹

Day 1: Display/Write *Judaism* on the board. Ask the class “Do you know what this means? Take a guess and record it on an index card.” Introduce the compelling question for this unit, then use the KWL chart in the student workbook

Table 1. *Annotated Text Set*

Book Citation	Book Summary
Shlomo Abas, <i>The Sages of Chelm and the Moon</i> , illus. Omer Hoffman (Green Bean Books, 2019).	In this Jewish folktale, the people of Chelm were supposed to be wise, but they acted very foolishly. They loved to go outside at night and admire the moon, but they were frustrated they could not see it every night. They decided to “buy the moon” and found a cunning salesperson who was able to capture the moon in a barrel and sell it to them. This was a trick and the people of Chelm were very upset when they realized they had been tricked out of their money.
Harriet Cohen Helfand and Ellen Kahan Zagar, <i>And There Was Evening and There Was Morning</i> , illus. Ellen Kahan Zager (Kar-Ben Publishing, 2018).	This book tells the traditional story of creation by utilizing Hebrew characters. As objects, plants, and animals are spoken into existence by God’s word, they appear in the book with images made entirely of the Hebrew characters that spell out their names.
Rinat Hoffer, <i>Shani’s Shoebox</i> , trans. Noga Applebaum (Green Bean Books, 2018).	This is the story of a young girl, Shani, who uses an old shoebox for different Jewish festivals throughout the year. She receives new shoes in the box for Rosh Hashana, and then the box follows her throughout the rest of the year as many Jewish holidays are celebrated including Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Hanukkah, Tu B’shvat, Purim, Pesach, Yom Ha’atzmaut, Lag Ba’Omer, and Shavuot.
Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, <i>Regina Persisted: An Untold Story</i> , illus. Margeaux Lucas (Apple and Honey Press, 2018).	This book tells the story of the first ordained female rabbi, Regina Jonas. Set in Berlin in the 1930s, this story features a young girl with big dreams. Regina experiences adversity in her life which strengthens her commitment to make her family proud and become a rabbi. Repeatedly, she is refused the opportunity to sit for the test because of her gender, and she is pressured to assume traditional female responsibilities. Eventually, Regina is allowed to take the test and becomes an ordained rabbi. While this story takes place at the time of the Holocaust, gender and community values are the central themes of this text. This text also seeks to disrupt stereotypes of gender roles within Judaism.
Shoham Smith, <i>Signs in the Well</i> , illus. Vali Mintzi (Green Bean Books, 2013).	This story tells how Rabbi Akiva, once a simple goat herder, became one of Judaism’s greatest and wisest scholars very late in life. The moral of the story teaches that persistence, faith, and will-power can help us with difficulties and that we can learn new things.
Bernard P. Weiss, <i>I Am Jewish</i> (PowerKids Press, 1996).	David, a young child who lives in St. Louis, is an observant Jew. Using David’s life as an example, this book outlines the basic tenets of Jewish beliefs and highlights a few key holidays. It also gives special attention to connections between Jews today and their history with the land of Israel.

Figure 1. IDM Blueprint

What makes Judaism unique?			
C3 Framework Standards and Oklahoma ELA Standards	<p>D2.Civ.10.3–5: Identify the beliefs, experiences, perspectives, and values that underlie their own and others' points of view about civic issues.</p> <p>D3.3.3–5: Identify evidence that draws information from multiple sources in response to compelling questions.</p> <p>D3.4.3–5: Use evidence to develop claims in response to compelling questions.</p> <p>D4.3.3–5: Present a summary of arguments and explanations to others outside the classroom using print and oral technologies.</p> <p>5.1.R.3: Students will engage in collaborative discussions about appropriate topics and texts, expressing their own ideas clearly while building on the ideas of others in pairs, diverse groups, and whole class settings.</p> <p>5.3.R.5: Students will distinguish fact from opinion in non-fiction text and investigate facts for accuracy.</p> <p>5.3.W.2: Students will introduce and develop a topic, incorporating evidence (e.g., specific facts, examples, details) and maintaining an organized structure</p> <p>5.6.R.3: Students will determine the relevance and reliability of the information gathered.</p>		
	Staging the Question	<p>Write <i>Judaism</i> on the board. Ask the class “Do you know what this means? Take a guess and record it on an index card.” Read or watch one or more sources (<i>I am Jewish</i>, “10 Surprising Facts About Judaism,” and/or “Types of Jews”). Make a list of common Jewish beliefs using the K and W sections of a KWL chart.</p>	
Supporting Question 1	Supporting Question 2	Supporting Question 3	Supporting Question 4
What is the difference between a belief, opinion, and fact? What do Jews believe?	What holidays are part of Jewish culture?	How are the experiences of Jewish men and Jewish women different?	Why are Jews persecuted? How do stereotypes contribute to discrimination against Jews?
Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task	Formative Performance Task
<p>Have students complete L of KWL chart.</p> <p>Conduct a pyramid discussion to consider how the books relate to the question about beliefs, opinions, and facts.</p>	<p>Fill out a short answer worksheet describing each of the holidays mentioned in the book.</p> <p>In partners, ask students to discuss which holidays they are most familiar with and why.</p>	<p>Complete the chart comparing Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Regina.</p> <p>Using the statement “Opportunities for men and women are the same in the Jewish culture as they are in my own culture,” conduct a value lines discussion.</p>	<p>Answer questions about the Jewish persecution article.</p> <p>Use the fishbowl discussion strategy to answer questions about antisemitism.</p>
Featured Source	Featured Source	Featured Source	Featured Source
<p>Source A: <i>And There Was Evening and There Was Morning</i> (Helfand and Zager)</p> <p>Source B: <i>The Sages of Chelm and the Moon</i> (Abas)</p>	<p>Source A: <i>Shani's Shoebox</i> (Hoffer)</p> <p>Source B: “Jewish High Holidays Explained” (Vyond; YouTube)</p>	<p>Source A: <i>Signs in the Well</i> (Smith)</p> <p>Source B: <i>Regina Persisted</i> (Sasso)</p>	<p>Source A: Article/close reading activity about the history of Jewish persecution</p>
Summative Performance Task	<p>ARGUMENT: Using the workbook, write an essay answering the question “What makes Judaism unique?” Follow a specific structure to complete the argument. For each statement, provide examples of why this specific point is an important part of Jewish culture.</p>		
	<p>EXTENSION: Create a collage demonstrating your understanding of Jewish culture. Be prepared to explain each part to the class.</p>		
Taking Informed Action	<p>UNDERSTAND: Identify why it is important to understand all aspects of Jewish culture, including why they have been discriminated against in the past.</p> <p>ASSESS: Assess ways that other people are also discriminated against.</p> <p>ACT: Write a letter to a local or national leader speaking out against acts of persecution.</p>		

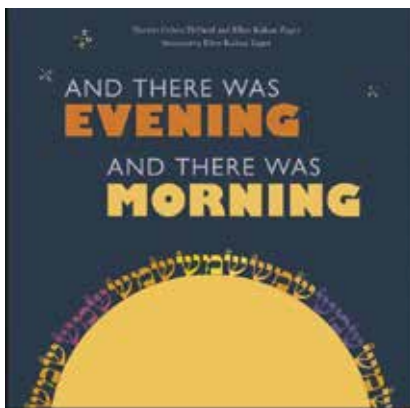
(see Pullout)¹⁰ to chart what we know about Judaism and what we want to know about Judaism (Letter L of the KWL chart will be completed on Day 2). Then, read or watch one or more of the following to learn about common Jewish beliefs as well as some of the differences within Judaism:

- Read *I am Jewish*.
- Watch “10 Surprising Facts About Judaism”¹¹
- Watch “Types of Jews: Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi and More”¹²
- Define the first three words in the glossary: *Judaism*, *Talit*, and *Torah*.

Day 2: Add definitions for *monotheistic* and *polytheistic* to the glossary in the student workbook (see Pullout), then start class by asking the students to think about yesterday’s conversation. Some questions you might ask include:

- What did we learn that Jews believe?
- Do all Jews have the same beliefs?
- What are some different types of Jews?
- How might life be the same or different for Jews living in the United States, Israel, or another country?

Have students fill out what they learned on the L section of their KWL chart. If desired, continue adding to this page throughout the unit.

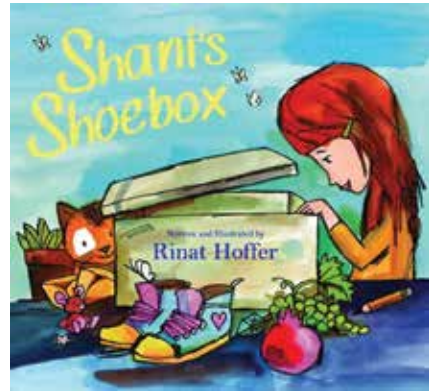


Next, move on to the supporting question, “What is the difference between a belief, an opinion, and a fact?” Display definitions for *belief*, *opinion*, *fact*, and *myth*. Then, read two stories: one that Jews might consider factual, *And There Was Evening and There Was Morning*, and one that they would consider myth, *The Sages of Chelm and the Moon*. After reading these stories, conduct a pyramid discussion using the questions below to consider how the books relate to the question about beliefs, opinions, and facts.

- What is the difference between a belief, an opinion, and a fact?
- What do Jews believe?

- Where do the beliefs, facts, and opinions show up in these two traditional Jewish stories?
- How are these the same or different from your beliefs?

Ask if there is anything more than can be added to our KWL charts. Optional: Have the students record their answers to the discussion prompt in their student workbooks (see Pullout).



Day 3: Define *miracle* and *seder* in the glossary. On days 3 and 4, we will discuss the supporting question, “What holidays are part of Jewish culture?” For the lesson, first read *Shani’s Shoebox*, then allow students time to research a Jewish holiday that is not Hanukkah (either by bringing in appropriate books or by allowing them access to the internet). Holidays introduced include Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Hanukkah, Tu B’Shvat, Purim, Passover, Yom HaAtzma’ut, Lag B’Omer, and Shavuot. Fill out the worksheet in the student workbook (see Pullout) with details about the holiday they chose. We will continue discussing this supporting question on day 4.

Day 4: Have students share their holiday research, then watch the video “Jewish High Holidays Explained.”¹³ At the beginning of this video, the narrator says, “In some parts of the world, Hanukkah is perceived to be the most important Jewish holiday,” which leads nicely into the discussion question for this topic. Using the think-pair-share strategy, ask students the discussion question, “Which of these holidays were you the most familiar with?” Allow students to think for one minute, then share with their partner for three minutes. As a whole class, each group will share their answer, then discuss why they think that is the case. If students are not familiar with Judaism, they may have only heard of Hanukkah. In the video, the narrator also says “Jewish people around the world celebrate these holidays a bit differently.” Continue the think-pair-share by asking students to think about what they have learned about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur from the book, the video, and the student presentations. Did all three sources match, or were there different ways Jews celebrate these high holidays? Optional: Have the students record their answers to the discussion prompt in their student workbooks.

Day 5: Discuss the supporting question, “How are the experiences of Jewish men and Jewish women different?” Read *Signs in the Well* and fill out the first section of the gender comparison worksheet in the student workbook (see Pullout) with characteristics about Rabbi Akiva. Then read the second book, *Regina Persisted*, and fill out the section with characteristics about Rabbi Regina. Facilitate a class discussion using the following questions to help scaffold student thinking:

- How do we know what people are experiencing?
- What have we learned from the other activities and stories about experiences of Jewish people?
- Are the experiences of all Jewish men and women the same?
- What experiences do men have in your culture?
- What experiences do women have in your culture?
- How are these the same or different from what we have read?

Using the statement, “Opportunities for men and women are the same in the Jewish culture as they are in my own culture,” conduct a value lines discussion. Have students move to different areas of the room based on whether they Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, or have questions. Optional: Have the students record their answers to the discussion prompt in their student workbooks.

Day 6: Introduce the supporting question, “Why are Jews persecuted? How do stereotypes contribute to discrimination against Jews?” Read the article about the history of antisemitism (see sidebar, “Additional Resources”) as a whole class, defining *antisemitism*, *discrimination*, *genocide*, and *misfortune* when they are encountered. Use the fishbowl discussion strategy to answer the following questions:

- What are some of the reasons Jews were persecuted?
- What did the persecution of Jews look like?
- How do stereotypes contribute to discrimination against

Additional Resources for Student Workbooks

- A. History of Antisemitism, <https://amyeducates.com/curricularresources/>
- B. Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, <https://hias.org/who-our-history/>
- C. “Inside a Texas Building Where the Government is Holding Immigrant Children” by Isaac Chotiner, June 22, 2019, *The New Yorker*, www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/inside-a-texas-building-where-the-government-is-holding-immigrant-children

Jews?

- Why would we learn about antisemitism? Do you think it still happens?

Optional: Have the students record their answers to the discussion prompt in their student workbooks.

Day 7: Remind students of the compelling question for the unit, “What makes Judaism unique?” Conduct a Socratic discussion and model “thinking on the whiteboard” as a means of scaffolding. In the discussion, revisit ideas that show what it means to be Jewish. Visually, create word maps that students can use as a guide, then have students answer the original compelling question as their summative assessment. This writing assignment can be used to meet writing goals based on what the class has been taught during English/Language Arts instruction. In addition, or alternatively, early finishers or students with accommodations may choose to create a collage answering the question.

Day 8: Students will share their summative assessments essays with the class.

Day 9: At the conclusion of this unit, help students identify why it is important to understand all aspects of Jewish culture, including why they have been discriminated against in the past.

Introduce the idea that, because Jews have been persecuted over and over, religious organizations like HIAS (www.hias.org) continually stand in solidarity with oppressed people. As a class, explore the HIAS website. The teacher should preview this website, then model for students what it looks like to engage with a website to learn information. Consider ways that other people are also discriminated against. This might involve revisiting ideas covered in previous lessons, or it might require finding resources to share. Introduce a current event that involves discrimination. For example, at the time this lesson was initially taught, the border crisis and ICE camps were heavily in the news. Students read an age-appropriate, scaffolded article about ICE camps (see sidebar, “Additional Resources”). This was a specific group HIAS was working with at the time.

Day 10: In response to the current event introduced on Day 9, have students write a response letter to a local or national leader. Alternatively, students might also write a letter to the editor, start a petition, or look for other meaningful ways to help. Regardless of the activity, be sure to complete the task associated with Taking Informed Action—send the letter, share the petition, etc.

Integration and Adaptations

As more and more classroom teachers are being asked to focus their time and attention on tested subjects like language arts

and math, the time allotted to social studies in the elementary classroom has become negligible.¹⁴ As a result, it may seem impossible to implement a two-week unit focused on social studies such as the one presented here. However, one possible way to combat the reduction in time available for social studies is through the integration of social studies content in other subject areas.¹⁵ These integrations are frequently surface-level investigations or trivialize social studies content, and this task is often seen as insurmountable. However, integration can be done thoughtfully, meeting standards from other disciplines while emphasizing social studies skills by analyzing sources, discussing controversial topics, and including honest content knowledge.¹⁶ Taking all of this into consideration, this two-week unit was intentionally designed to fit into time traditionally allotted to language arts. In addition to standards taken from the C3 Framework, this IDM also explicitly addresses Oklahoma fifth-grade English and Language Arts standards:

- 5.1.R.3: Students will engage in collaborative discussions about appropriate topics and texts, expressing their own ideas clearly while building on the ideas of others in pairs, diverse groups, and whole class settings.
- 5.3.R.5: Students will distinguish fact from opinion in non-fiction text and investigate facts for accuracy.
- 5.3.W.2: Students will introduce and develop a topic, incorporating evidence (e.g., *specific facts, examples, details*) and maintaining an organized structure.
- 5.6.R.3: Students will determine the relevance and reliability of the information gathered.¹⁷

Though ideally this lesson takes place over the course of ten days as outlined above, even if integration into time reserved for language arts is possible, this timeline may be unrealistic in many classrooms. Teachers should feel free to make adaptations to meet the instructional time available and may consider investigating specific supporting questions or completing only some of the accompanying activities. For example, teachers may choose to stage the question, then investigate only questions one and two before moving on to the summative performance task. To choose which questions to include, consider looking at the formative assessment tasks for each question and choosing questions with activities that align with skills you are trying to teach. As mentioned above, individual activities within this unit may align with content or standards from other subject areas. If students are working on writing research papers, including question two may be a great way to reinforce research skills, but if this is not a point of emphasis in your grade level, leaving out that task is also appropriate. Alternatively, if teachers prefer to include all four questions, consider grouping some together and selecting only some of the formative tasks. For example, a teacher may choose to complete the first formative assessment task for two of the four questions and conduct

class discussions for the other two. Finally, teachers can also consider moving some individual assignments to whole class work done verbally to decrease the time required to implement the full unit. ■

Notes

1. Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007).
2. Campbell Robertson, Christopher Mele, and Sabrina Tavernise, “11 Killed in Synagogue Massacre; Suspect Charged with 29 Counts,” *New York Times*, October 27, 2018.
3. Kevin Rector, “More Antisemitic Hate Seen in L.A. after Kanye West’s Hateful Rants” *Los Angeles Times*, October 23, 2022.
4. American Academy of Religion, *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K–12 Public Schools in the United States* (Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 2010), https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/hds2/files/aark12curriculumguide_lines3.pdf.
5. Elizabeth Saylor, Sohyun An, and Lisa Brown Buchanan, “The First Amendment, Religious Freedom, and Public Schools in the South,” *The Social Studies* 113, no. 3 (2022): 125–136.
6. American Academy of Religion, *Guidelines for Teaching about Religion in K–12 Public Schools in the United States*.
7. Denise Davila, “#WhoNeedsDiverseBooks?: Preservice Teachers and Religious Neutrality with Children’s Literature,” *Research in the Teaching of English* 50, no. 1 (2015): 60–83; AnnMarie Alberton Gunn, Susan V. Bennett, and Kaya van Beynen, “Teaching about Religion with Conversations and Multicultural Literature in K–6 Classrooms,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 33, no. 1 (2020): 10–16.
8. Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S. G. Grant, *Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies* (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies and C3 Teachers, 2018).
9. For more details about what a version of this IDM might look like when enacted with third-grade students, see Amy Allen, “We Don’t Know Enough About It’: Student Perceptions of Judaism as a Race, Religion, or Ethnicity,” *The Social Studies* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00377996.2023.2204063>.
10. Portions of the teacher-created workbook are included in this issue as the pullout.
11. FTD Facts, “10 Surprising Facts About Judaism,” October 12, 2019, YouTube video, 6:31, <https://youtu.be/RAkUKo9BFcU>.
12. myjewishlearning, “Types of Jews: Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi and More,” September 28, 2017, YouTube video, 1:40, <https://youtu.be/ZUHP6otJPg>.
13. Vyond, “The Jewish High Holidays Explained,” September 15, 2020, YouTube video, 2:02, <https://youtu.be/ByqjDhgJiNw>.
14. Linda Bennett and Elizabeth R. Hinde, *Becoming Integrated Thinkers: Case Studies in Elementary Social Studies* (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 2015); Paul G. Fitchett and Tina L. Heafner, “A National Perspective on the Effects of High-Stakes Testing and Standardization on Elementary Social Studies Marginalization,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 38, no. 1 (2010): 114–130; Neil O. Houser, “Social Studies on the Back Burner: Views from the Field,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 23, no. 2 (1995): 147–168; Timothy Lintner, “Social Studies (Still) on the Back Burner: Perceptions and Practices of K–5 Social Studies Instruction,” *Journal of Social Studies Research* 30, no. 1 (2006): 3–8.
15. Bennett and Hinde, *Becoming Integrated Thinkers*; Sara B. Demoiny and Stacie L. Finley, “Thoughtful Social Studies Integration: It’s Possible!” *Social Studies Journal* 38, no. 2 (2018): 39–47.
16. Demoiny and Finley, “Thoughtful Social Studies Integration.”
17. *Oklahoma Academic Standards for English Language Arts* (2016), <https://sde.ok.gov/oklahoma-academic-standards>.

Amy Allen is an assistant professor of Social Studies in the Elementary Education Program at Virginia Tech.