

## LESSON

# Pre-War Jewish Life in North Africa

## Overview

### About This Lesson

This lesson focuses on Jewish communities in pre-war North Africa, highlighting the diversity within those communities and integrating stories that are often marginalized in learning about Judaism or the Holocaust. In particular, the focus of this lesson is on the Jews of the Maghreb—the region of North Africa that includes Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia.

### Essential Question

- In what ways do the experiences of Jews in pre-war and wartime North Africa provide a more complete story of World War II and the Holocaust?

### Guiding Questions

- What did Jewish life in North Africa look like before the war?
- What were the relationships between different faith communities in pre-war North Africa?
- How might exploration of diversity within the Jewish world and the interreligious dynamics of pre-war North Africa inform our understanding of religion and identity?

### Learning Objectives

- Students will deepen their understanding of the diversity and complexity of Jewish life in pre-war North Africa through an analysis of images, film, and readings.
- Students will gain insight into the ways in which “single stories” of what it means to be Jewish can be combated through an exploration of Jewish communities in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia. These communities often fall outside of “standard” Jewish narratives of Jewish identity, culture, and tradition.
- Students will consider the implications of Lesson 1 as it relates to the study of the Holocaust and to the world today.

### What's Included

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

- **Handout:** Viewing Guide for “Pre-war Jewish Life in North Africa”
- **Handout:** Notes for “Pre-war Jewish Life in North Africa” Gallery Walk
- **Handout:** Gallery Walk: Jewish Life Before the War
- **Video:** [The Danger of a Single Story](#)
- **Video:** [Jewish Life in Pre-War North Africa](#)

## Preparing to Teach

### A Note to Teachers

#### 1. Setting Up the Room for the Gallery Walk

The [gallery walk](#) activity entails space to display multiple texts and images. The texts and images should be displayed in a way that allows students to disperse themselves around the room, with several students clustering around each particular text. Texts can be hung on walls or placed on tables. The most important factor is that the texts are spread far enough apart to reduce significant crowding—students should be instructed to view the texts in any order so the expectation is that they don't all cluster around one.

#### 2. Engaging with Challenging Content

In this lesson, students will read a range of sources and view a video that illuminates the realities of Jewish life in North Africa, and, while the Holocaust is not addressed directly, there is a reference to Jewish refugees from Europe that could raise questions about the Holocaust. The sources also explore aspects of Jewish life, history, and culture that could relate to the identities of students. For these reasons, it is crucial that students have the opportunity to process individually and together the emotions and questions this history evokes. We also recommend that you do the following:

- Preview each resource in this lesson before you share it with your students.
- Briefly review the class contract with students before beginning the lesson. This will help to reinforce the norms you have established and the idea of the classroom as a safe space for students to voice concerns, questions, or emotions that may arise.
- For more information, refer to the **Prepare to Teach** section for this mini-unit.

## Lesson Plan

### Activities

#### Day 1

##### 1. Reflecting on “The Danger of a Single Story”

In this lesson, students will read a range of sources and view a video that illuminates the realities of Jewish life in North Africa, and, while the Holocaust is not addressed directly, there is a reference to Jewish refugees from Europe that could raise questions about the Holocaust. The sources also explore aspects of Jewish life, history, and culture that could relate to the identities of students. For these reasons, it is crucial that students have the opportunity to process individually and together the emotions and questions this history evokes. We also recommend that you do the following:

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## 2. Think, Pair, Share in Response to Scholar Video

Introduce this series of lessons by explaining that students will be looking at North African culture and society as well as the lives of Jewish people living there before and during the Holocaust and World War II. Show students [a map of the North African countries](#) of Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco. Explain that for more than 2,000 years, there have been Jewish communities in the Maghreb, a term that means “the place where the sun sets”<sup>1</sup> and refers to the western part of the Arab world, including the area shown in the map. Then, share the essential question with students: “In what ways do the experiences of Jews in pre-war and wartime North Africa provide a more complete story of World War II and the Holocaust?”

Ask students to turn and talk briefly to discuss what they think they will learn in this series of lessons. If time permits, have students share their answers with the whole class.

Then, tell students that they will watch a video about **Jewish life in pre-war North Africa** to learn more about the diversity of pre-war Jewish life in the Maghreb. As students watch, ask them to record their notes in the **Viewing Guide for “Jewish Life in Pre-War North Africa”**.

After viewing the film, have students work in pairs to compare their answers to the questions in the **Viewing Guide for “Jewish Life in Pre-War North Africa”**, and then review the answers as a class.

Then, open a classroom discussion around the view expressed in the video that the history of wartime North Africa and the Holocaust *“has been a chapter that has been avoided . . . not forgotten, but avoided. . . .”*

Ask students:

- What is the difference between “forgotten” and “avoided”?
- Why might this distinction be important in studying the Holocaust and wartime North Africa?
- What questions does it raise for you?

Students might raise questions as to why this history has been avoided. According to UCLA Professors Boum and Stein, there are multiple reasons for this, and they point to some of those reasons as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Krieger, Joel. 2004. *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press.

“European-centered Holocaust studies have played a role in marginalizing the North African story, and the politicization of the Holocaust in Israel and the states of North Africa has rendered the topic historical taboo. In these contexts many scholars have been repulsed from exploring the impact of Nazi and Vichy-era anti-Jewish laws in North Africa during World War II.”<sup>2</sup>

## Day 2

### 1. Gallery Walk: Pre-War Jewish Life in North Africa

Begin today’s lesson with a review about the diversity of the Jewish population in North Africa that was shared in the video. Reinforce from the scholar video that:

- Origins of Jewish communities in the Maghreb date back more than 2,000 years. Initially, Jews lived among the local Amazigh tribes, whose roots in the region can be traced back to 10,000 BCE. The Amazigh people were adherents of a polytheist religion with a range of histories and traditions.
- Interactions between Jews and the Amazigh involved cultural exchange, and there were Amazigh Jews, just as there were subsequently Amazigh Christians and Amazigh Muslims (eventually, the majority of the Amazigh people were Muslim).
- By the end of the seventh century, Islam became the dominant religion across North Africa, and the dynamics between the Jewish and Muslim communities varied across time and place. There were periods of relative peace and coexistence interspersed with periods of persecution and violence toward Jews, depending on the approach to religious tolerance of the authorities in power.
- In 1492, thousands more Jews came to the Maghreb fleeing the Spanish inquisition<sup>3</sup> as they were expelled from their homes in Spain and Portugal.

The experiences and practices of Jews in the Maghreb reflect their diverse origins and histories as well as the cultures that evolved in dramatically different areas, from urban coastal centers to rural mountain villages.

To deepen understanding of Jewish diversity in pre-war North Africa, have students engage in a [Gallery Walk](#) activity.

- Share the handout, **Gallery Walk: Jewish Life before the War**, on Jewish life in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. The texts and images could be a handout or they could be displayed in a way that allows students to disperse themselves around

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<sup>2</sup> Aomar Boum, and Sarah Abrevaya Stein. 2019. *The Holocaust and North Africa*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> A policy that was purported to combat the “heresy” of non-Christians and that led to widespread expulsion, torture, and death.

the room, with several students clustering around each particular text. Texts can be hung on walls or placed on tables. There also need not be an expectation that students see every text, depending on time constraints.

- Students should be instructed to review the texts and images and record their thoughts in their journals. There is a guiding question on each gallery walk image to orient students to what information they are looking for within the images. Project the following prompts to guide their journal reflections, or give students the handout, **Gallery Walk: Jewish Life before the War**, on which they can take notes:
  - I noticed . . .
  - I wonder . . .
  - I was reminded of . . .
  - I think . . .
  - I'm surprised that . . .
  - I'd like to know . . .

## Extension Activities

### 1. Combatting the Single Story of What it Means to be Jewish

**Note to teacher:** As of May 2023, the [Com.unity Project](#) website was being upgraded. We are keeping this extension activity pending the upgrade, because the learning connected to this project supports an understanding of Jewish identities across time and place.

To facilitate students' ability to make connections from the lesson, revisit [the Danger of a Single Story](#) and consider ways to combat single stories, past and present. Invite students to explore the [Com.unity project](#) of the Anu Museum that brings in the stories of Jewish communities from around the world told in their own voices with the following guiding questions:

- What can be the impact of a site like this?
- How might this site combat the telling of single stories of Jewish communities?
- What might be implications for learning about religion or other identity markers, past or present?