The History of Jews in America

Overview
Ideally, Jewish American history should be integrated throughout the America history curriculum rather than simply being presented as a discrete topic. The ICS resource *Jews in American History: A Teacher's Guide* provides information about topics that are enriched by including Jewish American history along with significant facts that can be incorporated into existing lessons.

Sometimes teachers may want students to gain an overview of the entirety of Jewish American history, for example, during Jewish American Heritage Month (May). In this lesson, students read about a specific period of Jewish American history and form small groups with students who have read about other periods. Students then teach each other about the information they have read and demonstrate mastery of the material by creating either a visual or dramatic arts project.

This resource includes:
1) A lesson plan
2) Four student reading, each on a different period of Jewish American History

Goals
1) Students will be able to provide an overview of Jewish history in America and will recognize that Jews have been part of American society throughout its history.
2) Students will be able to discuss tolerance, acceptance, and opportunity in America as it relates to Jews. In particular, they will recognize that throughout its history, America has offered Jews relatively more tolerance, acceptance, and opportunity than other countries, but that the struggle for greater equality is part of the history of Jews in America.

Materials
Each student will need:
1) One of the following four documents (each document only needs to be copied for ¼ of the class):
    a. *Jews in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century America*
    b. *Jews in Nineteenth Century America*
    c. *Jews in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century America*
    d. *Jews in America from the Mid Twentieth Century through Today*
2) Material to create a visually interesting timeline such as poster board, construction paper, markers, or computers that can print images from the internet
3) (optional) Material to create props and costumes for a skit with characters from different periods of American history

Instructional Procedure
Anticipatory Set

1) Instruct students to list as many minority groups as they can.

2) Ask students to discuss the benefits of learning about the history of these different groups in America.

3) Ask students to discuss the similarities and differences between tolerance of minority groups, equality for minority groups, and acceptance of minority groups; ask students about the relationships between these concepts.

4) Inform students that they will be learning about the experience of one group whose history in this country stretches back to the colonial period. The Jewish experience illustrates how America can offer extraordinary opportunity and freedoms while falling short of the ideal of full equality and acceptance in society. It also demonstrates that progress towards a more inclusive society is a significant part of America's history.

Activity 1 – History Jigsaw

1) Split the class into four groups. If the class is very large, split it into eight groups instead.

2) Assign each member in each group a letter, beginning with A and proceeding sequentially (restart with A for each new group). Later in the activity, all the As, Bs, etc. will form new groups.

3) Assign each group one of the four readings (*Jews in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century America*, *Jews in Nineteenth Century America, Jews in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century America,* or *Jews in America from the Mid Twentieth Century through Today*)

4) Inform students that they will each need to become an expert on the period discussed in their section because their group will split up and each member will teach other students about it.

5) After groups have read and discussed their section, have the students form new groups based on their letter (i.e., all the As in one group, all the Bs in another, etc.).

6) If one of these new "letter groups" does not have at least one student who can discuss each section (i.e., at least one student who can discuss *Jews in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century America*, at least one who can discuss *Jews in Nineteenth Century America,* etc.), split the members among other groups.

Activity 2 – Student Teachers

1) Instruct students to take turns teaching each other about the material they read.

2) Have each "letter group" demonstrate their knowledge of Jewish American history either by:
   a. Creating a visually interesting timeline of Jewish American history (teacher may wish to provide material such as poster board, construction paper, markers, or computers that can print images from the internet).
   b. Or creating a skit where Jews from different periods of American History talk about their experiences.

Closure

1) Have student groups share their timelines or skits with the class.

Jews in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century America

Jews were part of colonial America's religious diversity in all three colonial regions: New England, Middle, and Southern. The first permanent Jewish community in what would later become the United States was established in 1654 by Jewish refugees from South America. These individuals had lived in a Dutch colony in Brazil where they were free to practice their religion. However, in 1654, the Portuguese conquered the colony. Portugal, at that time, was religiously intolerant and ordered all Jews and Protestants to either convert to Catholicism or leave. Most Jews returned to Holland, but 23 Jews left for the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, which became New York in 1664 when it was conquered by the English.

The governor of the colony, Peter Stuyvesant, did not want to allow the Jews to remain there. However, the directors of the Dutch West India Company, which oversaw the colony, wrote to Stuyvesant saying that he must allow the Jews to settle in the city. But this did not mean they had full equality. In fact, Jews did not have the right to public worship, which means to pray in a house of worship, for more than 40 years! Before this time they could only pray in private homes. Despite this initially cold reception, the Jews of New Amsterdam/New York gained most of the same rights as other settlers by the end of the seventeenth century including the right to trade, travel, construct religious buildings, and own property.

The first synagogue, a Jewish house of worship, in America was built by this community in 1730. Between the time they had gained the right to public worship and the construction of this synagogue, the community had rented space where they worshiped together. The congregation was named Shearith Israel, which means remnant of Israel. This name alludes to the community's sense of vulnerability as well as its connection with its heritage.

Like the Jewish settlers in New York, most early Jewish immigrants to America were Sephardi Jews, Jews who traced their ancestry to Spain, Portugal, or North Africa. They primarily emigrated from South America, the Caribbean, and Western Europe.

Jewish legal status and treatment varied greatly between the different colonies. But, in general, the colonies were tolerant of Jews and there were few overt anti-Jewish acts or instances of violence as was common in Europe. However, like other religious minorities, Jews often lacked full equality. Notably, after the Revolutionary War, they lacked the right to hold government office in almost every state. They could also lack other rights. For example, Jews did not gain the right to public worship in Connecticut until 1843.

Despite the lack of equality, Jews in colonial and post-revolutionary America were usually accepted as members of the larger society. Jews adopted the customs and fashions of their neighbors, went into business with them, and made friendships with those outside their religious community. One of the most significant differences between the Jewish experience in America and the Jewish experience in Europe is that in America Jews could be judged on their individual merit. In Europe, the primary factors affecting a Jewish individual's ability to prosper were the restrictions on and attitudes toward the community as a whole. In the colonies, and later in the United States, an individual's abilities and personality were greater factors and there were more opportunities for Jewish individuals to advance economically and socially. In fact, in 1774, Francis Salvador, a Jew, was even elected to the General Assembly of South Carolina. He also served in South Carolina's revolutionary Provisional Congress. He was killed in battle fighting for the Patriot cause during the Revolutionary War. Sadly, like most states

after the war, South Carolina placed religious qualifications on who could hold office that barred other Jews from being elected.

The lack of political equality for Jews in America should not obscure America's remarkable tolerance and acceptance of religious minorities. This general acceptance in colonial society contrasted sharply with the Jewish experience throughout most of the rest of the world where Jews were treated as outsiders. However, this acceptance presented a new challenge to the Jewish community: balancing a desire to integrate into mainstream culture with a desire to maintain a unique heritage. This is a challenge that Jews, like other minority groups, continue to wrestle with to this day.

During the colonial period, most Jews addressed this challenge by expressing their Judaism privately and trying to minimize their Jewish identity in public. This is symbolized by Touro synagogue, the oldest synagogue still standing in America. It was built in Newport, Rhode Island in 1763. The outside looks like any other building of the period with nothing that identifies it as a Jewish structure. Inside, however, it is full of Jewish objects and symbols. Likewise, colonial Jewish families typically downplayed their Jewish identity with their neighbors while maintaining their ancient customs and traditions with each other.

Jewish perspectives on, and participation in, the American Revolution paralleled the general population. The Continental Congress sent a request to pray for a peaceful resolution to the conflict with the Crown on July 20, 1775 to both churches and synagogues. There were Jewish merchant blockade runners, Jewish soldiers in the Continental Army, and Jewish officers. Of the many Jews who helped fight for American freedom, two of the most famous are Jonas Philips and Haym Solomon.

Jonas Philips was a blockade runner who wrote his supply list in Yiddish, the language of Eastern European Jews, hoping that this would help him avoid trouble if the ship was boarded by the British. Ironically, his plan backfired. When the British boarded the ship, they assumed the Yiddish was a code, seized the ship, and sent the note to England to be decoded. It is significant that Philips was fined in 1793 for refusing to testify in a Philadelphia court on the Jewish Sabbath because of his religious obligations. This illustrates that though there was a general acceptance of Jews, there was also a lack of sensitivity towards minority religious observances at this time.

Haym Solomon was a Jewish immigrant who joined the New York branch of the Sons of Liberty. He was captured by the British and sentenced to death. Fortunately, he was able to escape and flee to Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, Solomon began working with the Continental Congress. In 1975, the United States Postal Service issued a stamp identifying him as a "Financial Hero" who was responsible for "raising most of the money needed to finance the American Revolution and later to save the new nation from collapse."

From its first years after winning independence from Great Britain, the American government articulated support for religious toleration. The first piece of federal legislation that created provisions for religious tolerance was the Northwest Ordinance. This act was passed by Congress in 1787 under the Articles of Confederation and was reaffirmed by congress under the US Constitution in 1789. It is most famous for creating the first organized territory in the United States, but it also guaranteed freedom of religion in federal territories and future states.

The Constitution itself represents a major step forward for religious equality in America. It was adopted by Congress on September 17, 1787, two months after the Northwest Ordinance was first passed. Article VI prohibits religious qualifications for holding office at the federal level. This is particularly significant because many state constitutions contained these eligibility restrictions. The slow repeal of

these and other discriminatory laws between the late seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries is one of the earliest examples of social progress towards greater equality in this country.

In 1790, President George Washington clearly communicated the federal government's support of religious equality to the Jewish community. In his response to a letter from a member of the Jewish community in Newport, he wrote, "All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens." In other words, Washington assured the Jewish community that they had the right to practice their religion without losing other rights given to American citizens.

The following year, the states ratified the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the US Constitution. The first freedom of the First Amendment prohibits the federal government from creating an officially endorsed or supported religion and guarantees religious freedom. It reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof…" These protections only affected the federal government because of the separation of power between the federal government and state governments. However, it is important to note that even when they lived in areas with an established church, when they lacked the right to public worship, and when they could not hold political office, Jews in America had remarkable acceptance and economic opportunity compared to Jews elsewhere.

Over time, states increasingly removed laws that favored specific religious denominations or discriminated on the basis of religion. But this was a slow process. Thomas Jefferson wrote a bill to guarantee religious equality in his home state of Virginia in 1779. It took seven years for the bill to pass and become law. This law, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, is one of only three accomplishments that Jefferson listed on his tombstone.

Jews did not gain full legal equality in every state until 1877, more than 100 years after America declared independence. The experience of Jews and other religious minorities in the eighteenth century shows that the progress towards greater equality has been part of the American experience since the beginning of the country.

Jews in Nineteenth Century America

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jews had remarkable acceptance and economic opportunity in America as compared to the rest of the world. But, religious intolerance and discriminatory state laws remained problems. Fortunately, over the course of the nineteenth century, these discriminatory laws were removed. The removal of laws that favored a particular religion or discriminated against citizens based on their religious belief is of the earliest examples of progress towards greater equality in America.

However, like other efforts to provide greater equality for all Americans, this process could be slow and challenging. In Maryland, for example, Jews began to petition for the right to hold office in 1797. Twenty one years later, in 1818, a "Jew Bill" to give them this right was finally introduced into the state legislature. The effort to give Jews political equality was led by a member of the legislature named Thomas Kennedy. It is noteworthy that, in his own words, he did not "have the slightest acquaintance with any Jew in the world." He simply felt that religion was "a question which rests, or ought to rest, between man and his Creator alone."

Opposition to the bill was strong and it was defeated. Another bill to give Jews political equality was introduced in 1822, was sharply debated, and became a major issue in the election of 1823. A "Christian Ticket" succeeded in defeating many of the bill's supporters, including Thomas Kennedy, with the result that this bill was also defeated. But opponents of religious discrimination continued their efforts and finally, in 1826, a bill was passed. The first Jews were elected to office in Maryland later that year.

The removal of discriminatory laws was not limited to political issues. For example, Connecticut allowed Jewish public worship, the right to pray in a synagogue instead of a private home, in 1843. The last laws that discriminated against Jews were finally removed in 1877 when New Hampshire amended its constitution to abolish the requirement that state office holders be Protestant.

The contrast between the progressive attitude towards religious minorities at the federal level and the legal discrimination that could exist at the state level is revealed by the story of the first Jew to hold a major federal post. In 1801, Thomas Jefferson appointed Reuben Etting as the U.S. Marshall for Maryland. Ironically, religious qualifications for state office in Maryland would have barred Etting from holding any state position at that time.

It is important to note that despite laws to prohibit discrimination by the government and despite the ability for Jews to succeed, anti-Jewish bigotry remained. This is a familiar experience for many minority groups in America who have achieved legal equality but continue to experience discrimination from individuals and institutions.

In the early nineteenth century, this continued anti-Jewish bigotry paled in comparison to the challenges faced by Jews in Europe. As a result, beginning in the 1820s, many Jews in German speaking lands immigrated to America seeking greater economic opportunity, religious tolerance, and political stability. This wave of German-Jewish immigration, which lasted from 1820 until 1880, transformed American Jewish demographics. The Jewish population increased almost ten-fold as approximately a quarter million Jews immigrated. In addition, the American Jewish population shifted from being predominantly Sephardi Jews, who traced their ancestry to Spain, Portugal, and North Africa, to being predominantly Ashkenazi Jews, who traced their ancestry to Central and Eastern Europe.

Though both groups were Jewish, they had different traditions and customs. This contributed to the religious diversity of the American Jewish community. Another factor that contributed to this religious diversity was changing views of religious tradition. For millennia, Jews had discussed and interpreted their religious commandments while affirming the importance of the continuity with tradition. Beginning in the 1820s, some Jewish congregations asserted that they could maintain their Jewish heritage yet make significant changes. These changes included the use of musical instruments as part of the prayer service, delivering sermons in English, and teaching that Judaism's ritual commandments, such as dietary restrictions, were optional while ethical commandments, such as the responsibility to assist the needy, remained obligatory. Other Jewish communities maintained their millennia-old traditional practices. This diversity in American Judaism remains today.

The new Jewish immigrants from Central Europe came from areas where for centuries anti-Jewish laws had prohibited Jews from most professions. As a result, many were peddlers, traveling merchants who sold small goods. When they arrived in America, these peddlers typically resumed their old occupation in the new land. But in America, Jewish peddlers could prosper much more greatly than they could in Europe. In fact, the experiences of these peddlers are often seen as an embodiment of the rags to riches American dream (rising from poverty to great wealth).

Jewish peddlers played a key role in the American economy as middlemen who brought goods to rural areas and settlers in the West. Many started with only what they could carry on their backs and traveled by foot. Over time, they saved their profits and bought horses, then wagons. Eventually, many were able to open permanent stores that served cities and towns. Some eventually expanded these operations into banking, investment, or new industries such as the mail order catalogue.

Bringing goods to remote, underserved communities could lead to the development of close relationships between Jewish merchants and Native American communities. For example, Julius Meyer, a German Jew, was a merchant in Omaha who served as an interpreter for Native Americans in the area, including Sitting Bull and Red Cloud, when they passed through. He was reportedly able to speak six Native American languages. One German Jew even became the chief of a Native American tribe! Solomon Bibo developed strong relationships with Native Americans in the New Mexico territory. He married an Acoma Pueblo woman who converted to Judaism. In 1885, he was elected the tribe's governor, equivalent to a tribal chief who serves for a limited term. He is possibly the only non-Native American ever to serve as governor of a Pueblo tribe.

In addition to working as merchants, Jews went West to pursue the same variety of economic opportunities as other Americans. Jews became miners, chicken ranchers, cowboys, and farmers. The presence of Jews in the westward migration and the California Gold Rush reveals a dimension of the American West's multiculturalism that is often overlooked.

In fact, one of the most famous participants in the California Gold Rush was a German-Jewish immigrant. After opening a dry-goods store in San Francisco in 1853, Levi Strauss recognized that there was a great demand for something more durable than the cloth pants most miners wore. In the 1870s, he began to manufacture denim overalls. His company became the first blue jeans company in the world and Levi's remains one of the most popular brands of jeans.

The realities of frontier life gave Jews, like women, greater opportunity for civic participation in the American West than elsewhere. The generally relaxed attitude towards religious differences even enabled Jews to become mayors in cities such as Tucson, Tombstone, and El Paso.

On the other hand, Jews also faced challenges in the West. Despite widespread tolerance and the ability for Jewish individuals to succeed, antisemitic views, such as the belief that Jews were greedier or less trustworthy than others, remained. Jews also faced the challenge of maintaining their Jewish identities in areas with no synagogues and few other Jews.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 presented additional challenges for the Jewish community. Like the rest of the country, Jews were divided by the war. During the course of the war, there were approximately 7,000 Jewish soldiers on the Union side and approximately 3,000 Jewish soldiers on the Confederate side. Jews became high ranking officers on both sides of the conflict; this is particularly notable because they would have been barred from such positions in most of the rest of the world.

Jewish Americans also faced challenges that most other Americans did not have to face. In 1861, at the beginning of the war, Congress passed a bill that barred anyone except Christians from becoming military chaplains. This left Jewish soldiers without the important religious support that was provided to Christian soldiers. Fortunately, President Lincoln intervened and due to his influence the law was amended in 1862 to allow chaplains from any religious denomination.

The Civil War was also the backdrop to the most significant act of government antisemitism in America's history. In 1862, General Grant issued General Order No. 11, which expelled all Jews from Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee. He associated Jews with the merchants who were violating trade restrictions in the area even though most of the violators were not Jewish. President Lincoln had the order revoked after direct appeals from prominent Jewish Americans. Grant later apologized and there are no other antisemitic incidents associated with him. In fact, as president, Grant named several Jews to high office, and he was the first president to visit a synagogue while in office.

Jews in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century America

In the years following the Civil War, Jewish Americans were more fully accepted into American life than ever before. The last of the anti-Jewish laws on the East Coast were repealed. Jews were active citizens in towns and cities across the country. New elaborate synagogues, Jewish houses of worship, were built. These contrasted sharply with the subdued buildings of the Colonial era and reveal the increased confidence and security that the Jewish community felt. However, popular attitudes towards a new influx of Jewish immigrants resulted in decreased acceptance of all Jews.

Beginning in the 1880s, a tremendous number of Jews began fleeing Eastern Europe for America. Extreme poverty and vicious antisemitism, including horrific anti-Jewish riots and massacres, drove approximately two million Eastern European Jews to America between 1880 and 1924. This is the period of "New Immigration" when there was a massive increase of immigration to America from Southern and Eastern Europe. A Jewish woman, Emma Lazarus, captured America's vision of itself as a refuge for immigrants in her poem, "The New Colossus," which is quoted at the base of the Statue of Liberty. It closes, "'Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door!'"

However, many did not share this welcoming vision of America. The changes in American demographics, along with the country's urbanization and industrialization, fueled an explosion of anti-immigrant sentiment. This led to the passage of the 1924 Immigration Act, which sharply limited the ability for individuals outside of Western Europe to immigrate to America. As a result, Jewish immigration to America was virtually cut off. In addition, the depiction of Jews as threats to American values became common. Discrimination and prejudice against Jews increased. Hotels and clubs refused to admit them. Universities placed quotas on the numbers of Jews they would accept. Famous individuals such as Charles Lindbergh, Henry Ford, and Father Coughlin publicly expressed antisemitic views and accusations such as blaming World War I and the Great Depression on "the Jews." As the twentieth century progressed, hate groups such as the Ku Klux Klan targeted Jews, along with African-Americans and other minorities, with threats and attacks.

One of the worst incidents of antisemitism in America occurred in 1913 when a Jew name Leo Frank was convicted of murder and rape. Despite scant circumstantial evidence, a Georgia court sentenced him to death. When new evidence emerged that cast further doubt on Frank's guilt, the governor commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. Frank was then kidnapped from prison and lynched. Notably, his lynchers were key in reviving the Ku Klux Klan later that year.

Since his death, additional evidence has revealed the probable innocence of Frank. In 1982, a witness broke his long silence and swore an affidavit that Frank was innocent and that the real killer had threatened to murder him if he ever told anyone what he saw. In 1986, Georgia posthumously pardoned Frank on the grounds that his lynching had deprived him of his right to appeal his sentence.

Both the trial and the subsequent lynching illustrate the depth of antisemitism at this time. In response to the widespread anti-Jewish prejudice that made this incident possible and the rampant discrimination Jews faced, the Jewish community founded organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League to combat antisemitism. This paralleled the rise of similar organizations, such as the NAACP, that focused on the rights of other minority groups during this period.

Antisemitism, and the fight against it, continued throughout the 1920s and 30s. One of the most infamous examples is the publication of, and reaction to, antisemitic articles in *The Dearborn Independent,* which had the second highest circulation of any newspaper in the country by 1925. These bigoted articles were subsequently published in a series of booklets called *The International Jew*, which was distributed around the world and remains popular among hate groups today. At the time of its publication, more than 100 prominent American citizens, including President Woodrow Wilson, former Presidents Taft and Roosevelt, W.E.B. DuBois, and William Jennings Bryan, signed a statement that condemned *The International Jew* and the antisemitism it espoused and urged other public leaders to do the same. Though many accepted the antisemitic material, the vocal opposition of notable Americans showed that things could change. Ultimately, the *Dearborn Independent* closed as a result of the furor caused by its libelous attacks against Jewish individuals and promotion of hatred against the Jewish people.

Other evidence of America's progress towards a more open-minded society can be found in the fact that Jews were able to obtain high political offices. In 1914, Idaho voters elected the first Jewish governor, Moses Alexander. Two years later, Louis Brandeis became the first Jewish Supreme Court justice. He became an influential justice who argued for the right to privacy and for greater protections for freedom of speech. Brandeis University is named after him. On the other hand, Brandeis' story also reveals the continued existence of antisemitism as an obstacle to overcome. First, many people, including Brandeis himself, believed his long confirmation battle was motivated primarily by antisemitism. Second, after his confirmation, Brandeis had to cope with the antisemitism of his fellow Supreme Court justice, James McReynolds. McReynolds was exceptionally rude to Brandeis because he was Jewish; one year there was no official court photograph because McReynolds refused to stand next to him.

Most of the new Jewish immigrants entered America through Ellis Island in the harbor of New York. Ellis Island was the main entry for immigrants to America from 1892 until 1954. Over a hundred million Americans, including most Jewish Americans, have an ancestor who immigrated to America through Ellis Island. This figure is approximately one-third of the country's population. From Ellis Island, new immigrants spread across the country. Most settled in major cities, which grew dramatically at this time, and took jobs in factories, which were opening and growing as America industrialized. Many of the Jewish immigrants settled in the Lower East Side of New York. As a result, by the early twentieth century, New York had the largest Jewish population in the world.

Living and working conditions for these new immigrants were extremely harsh. They lived in overcrowded tenement buildings with dozens of people sharing a few rooms and a single bathroom. They worked long hours, often between 60 and 72 hours per week, in sweatshops under dangerous conditions for low wages. One of the worst industrial accidents in America's history took place in one of these sweatshops in the Lower East Side. On March 25, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, which manufactured women's blouses, caught fire. The exit doors were locked and the ladders of the fire trucks did not reach high enough to rescue the workers. 146 workers, mostly young Jewish and Italian women, lost their lives from the fire or jumped to their deaths. This tragedy led to safety and labor reforms. It also helped spur the growth of the labor movement.

Given the large numbers of Jews who worked in the sweatshops, it is not surprising that Jews became leaders in the early labor movement. Samuel Gompers, the founder of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), one of the first labor unions in the country, was Jewish. He served as its president every year except one until his death. David Dubinsky, a founding member of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), was also Jewish. The AFL and CIO eventually merged and today the AFL-CIO is the largest union in America. Dubinsky is also noted as an opponent of corruption in that organization.

In 1969, he was awarded a Presidential Medal of Freedom, one of the two highest civilian awards in the U.S.

Despite harsh conditions, Jewish culture flourished in communities of new Jewish immigrants. Though these immigrants came from a variety of areas in Eastern Europe, they were connected by a shared heritage and by a common language. Yiddish was the first language of most Eastern European Jews. It is written with Hebrew characters and combines elements of Hebrew, German, and various Eastern European languages. American Jews wrote Yiddish literature, published Yiddish newspapers, wrote Yiddish songs, and opened Yiddish theaters. For the most part, however, parents urged their children to adopt American culture. Today, few Jewish Americans are able to speak more than a few words of Yiddish. Jewish Americans, however, remain connected by their history and culture.

Jews in the early twentieth century also made major contributions to mainstream American culture. For example, Jews helped create the motion picture industry by helping found major movie studios such as Paramount, Fox, MGM, and Warner Brothers. In fact, the first "talkie" or movie with sound, *The Jazz Singer*, tells the story of a Jewish man who tries to reconcile his professional ambitions with his heritage. This Jewish content was atypical because studio heads feared that it would alienate non-Jewish Americans. Likewise, Jewish entertainers changed their names to be more acceptable to a large audience. Notably, the lead actor in *The Jazz Singer*, Al Jolson, was a Jew who had changed his name from Asa Yoelson. Other famous examples of this include: Harry Houdini (Erik Weisz), the famous magician and escape artist; Irving Berlin (Israel Isidore Beilin) one of the most prolific and influential songwriters in history whose songs include "God Bless America," "White Christmas," and "There's No Business Like Show Business;" and George Gershwin (Jacob Gershowitz), the composer who wrote many jazz standards and musicals, and who is the namesake of the Library of Congress' award for lifetime contributions to popular music, the Gershwin Prize.

Jews in America from the Mid-Twentieth Century through Today

In the years before World War II, antisemitism was pervasive in America. The anti-Jewish attitudes that had grown in the early twentieth century were magnified by the Great Depression as many Americans sought someone to blame for their misfortunes. In a Gallup Poll from 1938, 50% of Americans said that they had a "low-opinion" of Jews.

At the same time, anti-Jewish policies and anti-Jewish violence was increasing in Nazi Germany. Many German Jews sought to flee to America as discrimination and persecution increased. However, due to the National Origins Act of 1924, only a small percentage was allowed entry into the US. This restriction matched popular American sentiment. A 1938 Gallup Poll was conducted two weeks after Kristallnacht, when German and Austrian Jews were attacked and their businesses and synagogues were destroyed. Only 21.2% of Americans thought the government should allow more Jews to immigrate. These attitudes persisted as the situation of European Jews deteriorated. Since virtually every other country also refused to accept Jewish immigrants, most of these individuals were murdered in Nazi death camps during the Holocaust. Some Jewish individuals, including Albert Einstein, one of the most famous physicists in history, were able to immigrate. But most were trapped under Nazi control.

After entering the war, the U.S. government's position was that the best way to help the Jews in Europe was to win the war quickly. However, by 1944, with millions of Jews already dead, the Roosevelt Administration felt it could no longer ignore the systematic murder of the Jewish population. After reading a report detailing the United States' failures to obstruct Hitler's destruction of Europe's Jewish population, President Roosevelt created the War Refugee Board. It saved approximately 200,000 Jews and was an important development in the idea that it is important to protect civilians in other countries.

Jewish experiences also influenced American immigration and asylum policies. Before World War II began, Jews under Nazi rule tried to flee to other countries, including the U.S., but were turned away. Most were later murdered in the Holocaust. In 1951, the U.S. and other members of the United Nations agreed not to return refugees against their will to any territory where they fear persecution. Today, America and other Western nations are safe havens for thousands fleeing persecution.

Lessons from the Holocaust also shaped medical and legal precepts. In response to inhuman Nazi experiments, new research guidelines requiring experimenters to receive the consent of human subjects were created. The trial of Nazi officials after the war established the principle that individuals could be held responsible for their role in crimes whether or not their government ordered them to commit the crimes and whether or not they were actually present when the crime was committed.

World War II and the Holocaust had a tremendous effect on America's Jews. One major effect was to greatly increase support for the creation of Israel. Zionism, the belief that the Jewish people have the right to create a country in their ancient homeland, had not previously been very influential among Jewish Americans. Attitudes changed after learning of the Holocaust in which six million Jews were brutally murdered and hundreds of thousands were left as survivors in horrible displaced persons camps with nowhere to go. Both of these facts fueled support for Zionism. First, immigration to Israel was seen as a solution to the question of where the survivors could live. Second, it was clear that a Jewish homeland could have prevented the Holocaust and could prevent similar future atrocities. Other countries did little to save Jews, but a Jewish state could have offered them refuge. These realizations also led many to learn more about Zionism. For example, individuals might reflect on the fact that for millennia Jews had maintained a strong connection to the Land of Israel and the daily prayer service asked for Jewish exiles to be able to return.

World War II also impacted interactions between Jewish and non-Jewish Americans. Most Americans had never met a Jew before the war. During the war, more than 550,000 Jewish soldiers served. 26,000 of these Jewish soldiers received the Medal of Honor or the Purple Heart. In addition, sixty percent of all Jewish physicians under the age of 45 served in the armed forces during the war. Interacting with Jews in the military challenged antisemitic ideas.

Furthermore, when the horrors of the Holocaust became known, antisemitism became less socially acceptable. One indicator of this was the film, *Gentleman's Agreement,* which won three Oscars, including Best Picture in 1947. The film was critical of antisemitism in American society. During the 1950s, barriers to Jewish participation in mainstream American life continued to shrink. Clubs and hotels began admitting Jews. University quotas limiting the number of Jewish students were removed. Businesses and banks became willing to hire Jewish individuals.

America's acceptance of Jews both enabled and was reinforced by Jewish entertainers. Unlike earlier Jewish entertainers who tried to hide their Jewish identity, Jewish actors and comedians in the 1950s were identifiably Jewish. This shows an increased confidence among Jews regarding their acceptance in America. These Jewish individuals further eroded antisemitism through their popularity and by exposing millions of Americans to Jewish culture. Words such as "klutz" and "oy" entered the American vocabulary as Jewish culture became more mainstream. Likewise, foods such as the bagel and kosher dill pickle entered American cuisine.

At the same time, elements of American Jewish culture began to disappear as Jews became more assimilated. Throughout Jewish American history, many Jews felt that sounding or looking different from their non-Jewish neighbors was an obstacle towards acceptance and success. The Eastern European Jews who immigrated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries urged their children to become "as American" as possible. Unfortunately, this often resulted in the loss of cultural elements that set Jews apart such as the use of the Yiddish language. The disappearance of Yiddish theater and literature was accelerated by the growth of the suburbs, since this destroyed the Jewish neighborhoods upon which these institutions depended.

A less direct effect of the Holocaust on American Jews was to spur great levels of participation in the Civil Rights Movement. The memory of their own community's recent experience with vicious hatred, combined with Jewish ethical teachings, inspired many Jews to fight for the equality of all Americans regardless of race. Approximately half of the civil rights attorneys in the South during the 1960s and half of the white Freedom Riders who fought segregation were Jewish. Almost two-thirds of the white people who went to Mississippi in 1964 to challenge Jim Crow Laws during Freedom Summer were Jewish, including Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, two of the three activists in the campaign who were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan.

Jews were also very involved in the struggle for women's rights. Many feminist leaders, as well as many of the rank-and-file, are Jewish. Betty Friedan is widely considered the most influential American feminist after World War II. Her 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, attacked the notion that women could find fulfillment only through childbearing and homemaking. Gloria Steinem, cofounder of the national Women's Political Caucus and founder of *Ms*. magazine, is also Jewish. So was Bella Abzug, a leading Feminist who was elected to Congress after stating, "This woman's place is in the House — the House of Representatives."

Feminism also affected Jews in other ways. Most notably, it had a profound effect on the Jewish religion. Judaism had long taught that men and women had equal worth but different responsibilities. As a result of American feminism, gender roles in religious worship were challenged. In 1972, Sally Pries and

became the first woman rabbi, a leader of a Jewish congregation. Many communities have added traditions affirming the equality and experiences of women in Judaism. Even within many traditionally observant Jewish communities, religious women focus on increased inclusion within the framework of traditional modes of worship.

Another mass movement within the American Jewish community during this time was advocacy on behalf of the more than four million Soviet Jews. Jews in the former Soviet Union were prohibited from practicing their religion freely and often faced harsh discrimination, but few were given permission to leave the country. American Jews traveled to the Soviet Union to secretly offer support. They also strove to raise attention to the issue and to urge the U.S. government to help. In 1987, a quarter-million people marched in Washington to urge action. Ultimately, this grass roots movement succeeded and most Jews from the former Soviet Union now live in Israel, Western Europe, or the United States.

Jewish Americans are an incredibly diverse group. They hold the same wide range of political beliefs and occupations as other Americans. Some have families who have lived in America for centuries; others have immigrated recently. Some observe all of the millennia-old traditional Jewish practices; some feel that individual choice in how to express one's religion is the best way for them to connect to their Jewish religious heritage; and some are not religiously observant. Along with this diversity, American Jews have a strong sense of community and Jewish communal organizations thrive. These organizations include religious, social, educational, cultural, and philanthropic institutions. Some cater to the Jewish community; others are devoted to providing services to the larger community.

Today, Jews are integrated into mainstream American culture and society more than ever before. Unlike times past when opportunities were limited or when Jews changed their names to be more accepted by mainstream society, Jewish heritage is not typically seen as an obstacle to success. Jewish American experiences show that the struggle for greater equality and acceptance is part of American history and that this struggle can succeed.