LESSON 7: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Theme/Topic/Big Ideas: Jewish naming traditions and how they relate to family histories

Summary: In this lesson, students examine their own first, middle, last, and Hebrew (or Jewish ritual) names (as applicable), learn about Jewish name origins and naming traditions, and prepare to conduct research to learn more about names in their family.

Essential Question(s)
- How did Jewish migration patterns impact the expression of Jewish culture, including names?
- How is my family's story, including stories of our name, connected to larger stories of Jewish migration and naming?

Objective:
In this lesson, students will learn that:
- Patterns in Jewish family names reflect geography, occupation, nicknames based on other personal characteristics, and parental given names.
- Their own family histories, including family names and languages, are connected to a larger Jewish story.

Time: 60 minutes

Handouts and Visuals Link

Materials and setup
Printouts of Name Worksheet and Interview Worksheet: Family Names
Paper, markers, and other art materials
Sticky notes
Devices with internet access to visit the ANU database
Name-related fun fact cards
Links (or printouts) for article, videos, or short story if sharing with students

Background Information for Educators:

Article about Jewish surnames:
https://dbs.anumuseum.org

Video about Jewish surnames and name changing:
https://vimeo.com
(4:26– 41:07)
Video about Jewish personal names:
https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/
(2:56–43:33)
Short story about Jewish personal names:
https://www.jewish-names.org/curriculum
"Allison Searches for Her Hebrew Name," by Rabbi Zoe Klein from Candle, Feather, Wooden Spoon: New Jewish Stories, © 2023 by Central Conference of American Rabbis, used by permission of the CCAR. All rights reserved.

If you're using this lesson after one on language, here's a possible transition: Last class we learned about Jewish languages. Today we'll be focusing on a particular aspect of language: names.

Introduction/Set Induction: Name Analysis (5 min)

Pass out paper and pens or markers, plus a few small sticky notes, to students. Share these instructions:
- Write your first, middle, and last name in medium letters in the center of a paper.
- If you know your Hebrew name (also known as a Jewish ritual name), write it just below that.
- Around each part of your name, using arrows, write what you know about it (e.g., I was named Sarah after my grandma who had the same name, and my last name, Berg, used to be Wasserberg.)
- Leave extra space to fill in things you don't know.
- Use sticky notes to add questions you want to ask about your family name.

CONNECT: Take a Step Forward, Name Edition (5 min)

Using the information you just noted about your name, play "Take a Step Forward." Share with students that this is a way for us to understand the diversity around naming traditions in the Jewish community: some people have Hebrew names, some do not. Some families have specific naming traditions, some do not. Remind students that they do not have to share any information that makes them feel uncomfortable. Read aloud each of the prompts below, one at a time, and have students to whom the prompt applies take a step forward.

- Take a step forward if:
  - You have a hyphenated last name
  - You have a Hebrew name that starts with the same letter as your regular name
  - Your family changed their last name long ago
  - You are named after a relative who died before you were born
  - You are named after a relative who was living when you were born
  - You do not have a Hebrew name
  - You know why your parents chose your first name
  - Your regular name (as opposed to your Hebrew name) comes from the Bible
  - Your regular name is Hebrew

Come back to the group and have each group share out about their different name derivations, including examples.

EXPLORE: Surname Origins (15 min)

Handout Link

Share with students that Jewish surnames (also known as last names or family names) around the world can be categorized into a few categories. Divide students into six groups to learn more about name types, see if they can think of any examples, and come up with a creative way to share this information with their classmates. Assign one group to each name type, and provide them with the relevant information below. Their task is to share four names from their list that come from different Jewish communities (Ashkenazi, Italian, Georgian, etc.) and two names that are not on that list. They can find them by thinking of the names of people they know or looking up names in the search box at the top of this page:
https://dbs.anumuseum.org.il

EXPLORE: Surname Origins (15 min)

(Note: this database does not give the origin of many names and gives a lot of incorrect information; we eventually hope to create a better database. For now it's the best we have. Feel free to share the videos, story, and/or article in the "Background information for teachers" section with your students as an alternative or supplement.)

DISCUSS: New Jewish names and name changes (10 minutes)

We've been talking about family names that have been part of Jewish communities for 100–800 years depending where they're from. But over the last century, many Jews have acquired new family names. How do you think that happened?

Conversion: People of other religions converting to Judaism and passing their name on to their children

Intermarriage: Jews marrying non-Jews and giving their children the name of the non-Jewish spouse

Name changes: Why do you think someone would change their surname? What stories do you know about this in general or from your family?

Marriage: One spouse often takes the other spouse's surname when they get married. Other couples select a new name when they get married or have children, sometimes hyphenating their two names and sometimes combining elements of both of their names (like Kirzner + Crane = Kirzane; Kroll-Zeldin + Elkind = Zakai)

Antisemitism: Jews changing their family name to something more generic to avoid antisemitic persecution. This was especially common among immigrants and children of immigrants in Hungary, England, and the United States (Hollywood actor examples, e.g., Winona Ryder was originally Winona Horowitz!)

Zionism: Jewish immigrants to Israel selecting Hebrew names to fit into the Hebrew-speaking Jewish melting pot (examples like Golda Meyerson becoming Golda Meir, Eliezer Perlman becoming Eliezer Ben-Yehudah, and David Grün becoming David Ben-Gurion).

If a student shares a story about an Ellis Island name change, feel free to share information that debunks this myth, as found here: https://www.nypl.org

LEARN: Connect their stories to broader Jewish trends (15 min)

Pass out the Name Worksheet.

Handout Link

Have students write the answers to as many of these questions as they can. Clarify that you don't expect you to know all of the answers and that they'll be researching what they don't know.

REFLECTION/CONCLUSION: (5 minutes or more, if desired.)

Discuss: What can names tell us about who we are? What can they represent? How are they passed on?

For classes that have completed earlier lessons: How do you think this information about names is connected to the previous lessons about migration and languages?

CONNECT: Name Research Planning (20 minutes, or assign as homework)

Handout Link

1. Conduct some online research to see if you can learn more about your surnames (your own and others in your family). The ANU: Museum of the Jewish People's database of Jewish names is a great resource for learning more about family names and also has an interesting general article about Jewish name origins, as well as articles about Egyptian, Iranian, Afghan, and Ethiopian names.
        https://dbs.anumuseum.org.il
2. Write down anything new you learn about your name through this research. Add it to your name analysis worksheet.
3. Make a plan to interview a family member (parent) to learn some of the answers to your questions. Use the interview worksheet below, and be sure to add extra questions based on the questions you listed on your sticky notes. At the end of this interview, make a list of questions that your parent was unable to answer– you'll have a chance to ask another family member about these in a later interview.

Optional Extension: Name Cloud

Using a word cloud generator like wordart.com, input first or last names of your students to get a playful snapshot of your class names.