



**BECAUSE WE  
WERE SLAVES:**

**THE JEWISH STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE  
IN MAKING AMERICA HOME**



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## A NOTE FROM CHAI MITZVAH

The title of the curriculum, *Because We Were Slaves: The Jewish Struggle for Justice in Making America Home*, alludes to the daily Jewish commandment to remember that we were slaves in Egypt and therefore should never turn a blind eye to injustice.

These materials focus on how Jewish people dealt with their precarious position – sometimes accepted and sometimes not – as they endeavored to make America their home. But to understand the broad experiences of Jewish struggle in the United States, one must also fully understand the begrudging acceptance Jews have experienced from the moment 23 Sephardic refugees arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654, to the present day challenges faced by the Jewish community.

We do not in any way equate the Jewish experience to Black slavery, nor do we attempt to discuss Black slavery in all of its grim and horrific history. Our goal is to spark discussions that examine the topic of prejudice through a Jewish lens and core Jewish values.

These sourcebooks are supplemented by first-person accounts through the eyes of people who have taken this journey, and augmented by links to further reading, videos, and music. *Because We Were Slaves* encourages students to find a connection between the texts and our lives today.

Our goal of this, and of all Chai Mitzvah materials, is to provide the framework for meaningful conversations, and to ignite deeper insight and continued growth in one's Jewish Journey.

Chai Mitzvah would like to thank Dr. Sara Fieldston for sharing her comprehensive knowledge of history and her educational expertise, and Rebecca Woldin for contributing her attention to detail and unique viewpoints. Thank you as well to a group of veteran educators known as the Chai Mitzvah Chaverot for their important and diverse perspectives.

Additionally, Chai Mitzvah would like to thank Nina Fondiller Woldin and Audrey Lichter for their hard work in bringing this curriculum to fruition.



## SECTION 1: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK



### ACTIVITY: CATEGORIES

Try this activity to get started on your exploration of racism. You can work by yourself or in a group. **Here's what to do:** 1) Draw three columns on paper or on the chalkboard if in person, or a Jamboard if remote. 2) In each column, write characteristics you think would apply to a person who likes a each flavor of ice cream listed here: *vanilla*, *rocky road*, or *vegan (non dairy)*.

Creating categories – established, or simply of our own making (like people who like certain flavors or ice cream) – is a normal and human response.



### INTRODUCTION:

In this curriculum we will discuss the definitions of various forms of prejudice and certain events that serve as examples of racist policies. We will explore Jewish views from traditional texts, and embed our discussion with challenges and opportunities that the Jews have faced and are facing in the United States today.



### TEXT:

**SOURCE:** *Oxford Dictionary*

*Prejudice* is a preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience, for example, “**prejudice** against people from different backgrounds.”



### CONVERSATION:

- We often look at each other and make immediate assumptions. Why do we create categories in the first place? Is there a need for people to “put other people into boxes?”
- Have you ever been labeled? If so, was it a positive or a negative label? How did you feel about it?



## KINDS OF LABELS

- **Race** refers to “any one of the groups that humans are often divided into based on physical traits regarded as common among people of shared ancestry.” (Merriam-Webster)
- **Racism** is a belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.
- **Ethnicity**, is a word derived from the Greek word *ethnos*, meaning nation. Race is usually thought of as something inherent in our biology, inherited across generations and unchangeable. Ethnicity, on the other hand, is typically understood as something we acquire, based on factors like where we live or the culture we share with others. Both race and ethnicity are socially constructed concepts which change over time.
- **Ethnocentrism** is the attitude that one’s own group is superior to others.
- **Ethnic conflict** is a conflict which is perceived along ethnic lines. Ethnic conflicts are generally not about ethnic differences but about political, economic, social, cultural, or territorial matters.

For as long as the human race has had different ethnicities they have been clashing.



## CONVERSATION:

- **Antisemitism** means hostility towards, or prejudice against, Jewish people. How does antisemitism relate to the concepts of above?
- Have you ever experienced or observed prejudiced behavior towards yourself or someone you know? Explain.
- Have you ever found yourself prejudging other people in a positive or negative way? Explain.



## INTRODUCTION: WHERE DID RACISM COME FROM?

Most people believe that racism is bad, and we should work to remove it from our world.

The origins of racism in western culture are likely Greek, and based on what the ancients considered “rational” observations. The idea of “race” as a categorizing term for human beings first appeared in the late 16th century. It was originally used to classify people in terms of *type, sort, or kind*. but in Europe it quickly changed to create hierarchies based on the color of someone’s skin.

As science progressed, ideas of racism developed with it. Using “science” to justify continued racism is known as *scientific racism*. This form of racism was popular in the United States and Nazi Germany.



When Hessa Taft was six months old, she was a poster child for the Nazis. Her photograph was chosen as the image of the ideal Aryan baby, and distributed in party propaganda. But what the Nazis didn’t know was that their perfect baby was really Jewish.

“I can laugh about it now,” the 80-year-old Professor Taft told Germany’s *Bild* newspaper in an interview. “But if the Nazis had known who I really was, I wouldn’t be alive.”

[Read more about Hessa Taft.](#)

Some 19th-century scientists, like Harvard’s Louis Agassiz, were proponents of *polygenism*, which argued that different races of humans were distinctly different species. This theory was supported by pseudoscientific methods like *craniometry*, the measurement of human skulls, which supposedly proved that White people were biologically superior to Black people. Early statistical health data was weaponized against Black Americans in the late 1800s, used to claim they were predisposed to disease and destined for extinction.

From 1933 to 1945, Nazi Germany carried out a campaign to “cleanse” German society of individuals viewed as biological threats to the nation’s “health.” Enlisting the help of physicians and medically trained geneticists, psychiatrists, and anthropologists, the Nazis developed racial “health” policies that began with the mass sterilization of “genetically diseased” persons, and ended with the near annihilation of European Jewry.

Using the legitimacy provided by “racial” science experts, the Nazi regime carried out a program of approximately 400,000 forced sterilizations and over 275,000 deaths that found its most radical manifestation in the murder of millions of “racial” enemies in the Holocaust.

## BECAUSE WE WERE SLAVES

By the early to mid-20th century, polygenism and biology-based racism were widely disproven, but racism in social science had gained popularity. Studies showing high imprisonment rates among Black Americans were used as proof of innate criminality, and pseudoscientific intelligence testing claimed the mental superiority of White people. These flawed, biased studies failed to account for political and social factors such as poor housing, poverty, lack of healthcare, and virulent racial oppression.



### TEXT:

In 1968 Jane Elliot, a third-grade teacher, did an exercise in an attempt to teach her students about racism. As you [watch the video](#), consider the following questions: What were the lessons, and how have things changed since those days?



### CONVERSATION:

Although some claim that this experiment was naive and did not seriously confront the issues of racism in the United States, it nonetheless demonstrated that racist attitudes are often based on arbitrary and learned beliefs. After viewing this video:

- What do you think about being “color blind?”
- From what you have learned and experienced, how do you think things have changed since 1968?

Additional Sources:

[The Complicated History of Eugenics in the United States](#)

[United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: Nazi Racial Science](#)

Chai Mitzvah was created as a way to engage adults, teens, and families in their Jewish journeys and in their communities throughout their lives. Combining texts to spark discussion, ritual, and social action, Chai Mitzvah provides the framework for a meaningful Jewish experience.

It is our hope that your Chai Mitzvah experience will ignite deeper insight and continued growth.



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