



## **A Historical look at the Situation for Soviet Jews 1940s-1960s**

### **Lesson Plan**

#### **Introduction**

In this lesson, students will learn about the Soviet campaigns against the Jews from the 1940s through the 1960s, the revival of Jewish national identity, and the beginnings of international protests against the situation of the Jews in the Soviet Union.

#### **Learning Objectives**

Students will understand and be able to discuss the severe conditions of Soviet Jews under Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev, including the lack of opportunities for religious and national expression. They will be able to delineate major events relevant to the fight for Soviet Jewry.

#### **Materials**

Attached overview of Historical Background, propaganda posters and texts

#### **Background**

See attached document

#### **Procedure**

- Hand out Soviet anti-Semitic propaganda posters to students and analyze them as a class. Have them try to put themselves in the position of Soviet Jews. What emotions are evoked when seeing these posters? How would they feel walking around their home country and seeing similar propaganda in their day to day lives?
- Review the background history of Jews in the Russian Empire (above) having students take note of high and low points of the Jewish experience there (this will be used for a cumulative assessment).
- Read the article in *The New York Times* and/or The Jewish Telegraphic Agency reporting on the publication of the correspondence between Bertrand Russell and Nikita Khrushchev. Bertrand Russell was a British Nobel laureate – a philosopher, historian,



writer, mathematician, social critic, and political activist known for his pacifist views. He took up many political and social causes, writing numerous letters to world leaders on these topics. He lived from 1872-1970.

- This publication caused a Soviet Jew to write to Russell to intervene on behalf of Soviet Jewry to stop the cultural suppression and discrimination against Jews. He petitioned him to write to the editor of the Jewish journal "*Sovietish Heimland*". Read and discuss the letter sent by the Jew as presented by Russell, as well as the response of the editor which denies any cultural suppression or anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union.
- Have the students write a response that Russell could have replied to the editor using points of argument based on what they learned in class.
- Read Russell's actual response.

## Alternative Activity

- Compare the story of Soviet Jewry to other eras in Jewish history when Jews had to hide their Judaism and practice in secret.
- Divide students into groups and assign each group a text relating to a different period in Jewish history.
- For each text, have students answer the following questions:
  - What were the historical events which forced the Jews to practice in secret?
  - How did the Jews manage to defy their oppressors and stay spiritually alive?
  - Was this the decision that all the Jews made or were there some who succumbed to the oppression? (not relevant to all)
- Texts:
  - The Book of Maccabees I 1: 41-53 (42-52 on Sefaria), 2:15-63 (16-66 on Sefaria) or sections – English translation available at [https://www.sefaria.org.il/The\\_Book\\_of\\_Maccabees\\_I?lang=bi](https://www.sefaria.org.il/The_Book_of_Maccabees_I?lang=bi)
  - [Daniel 6:6-17 – English translation available at <https://www.sefaria.org.il/Daniel.6?lang=bi> ]
  - Taanit 28a "אמרו פעם אחת – ושם רשעים ירקבו" – English translation available at <https://www.sefaria.org.il/Taanit.28a?lang=bi>
  - "I am a Marranno" By Anne Cardoza (attached)
  - The testimony of Karin Bamberger from Bergen-Belsen (attached)
  - [Rambam's Epistle to Yemen (attached)] The Rambam (Maimonides) was one of Judaism's most prominent halachic figures. Among his vast array of writings was



the *Mishneh Torah*, the only complete codification of Talmudic Law. He was also a philosopher, a physician, and the leader of Egypt's Jewish community. He lived from 1135-1204.

- Have each group present its text in a creative way.
- Discuss the lengths to which Jews throughout history went in order to preserve their Judaism under extreme conditions and what they sacrificed in order to do so.
- Compare this to our own experiences, living in a place where we can practice freely.