

Activities

Activity 2

How Jewish Ritual, Prayer and Holidays Maintained Connections between Jews and between Jews and Israel

Preparation:

Time Frame: 1 class period • **Materials:** Activity cards (see below) and the *Israel 101* booklet

Lesson Plan: Give students an overview of Jewish ritual, prayer and the holidays (see “Background” below). Have students engage in an investigative activity revolving around these topics as a way to learn about how Jews have always been connected to the land of Israel.

Background: The guiding question for this activity is: “In the rituals, prayers and holidays of the Jewish people, how was a strong connection maintained between the Jewish people and the land of Israel?” In order to understand the connection between the Jewish people and the land of Israel, it is important to know that (1) Jews lived as an ancient nation in the land of Israel (as a series of tribes, as a people ruled by judges, as a monarchy ruled by kings, etc.) until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., (2) after this traumatic event, the Jews continued to survive as a people based on the rituals, prayers and holidays of the Jewish religion, and (3) these rituals, prayers and holidays explicitly connected Jews to the land of Israel and the hope of returning to reestablish a Jewish nation again in this land.

The origins of the Jewish religion are documented in the Five Books of Moses, called the “Torah” in Hebrew. It is part of the Jewish Bible, which is called the “Tanach” in Hebrew. The origin of many Jewish holidays – such as the three pilgrimage holidays of Passover, Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks) and Sukkot – are also described in the Torah. Other Jewish holidays – such as Purim, Chanukah and the fast day of the Ninth of Av (which commemorates the destruction of the Second Temple) – are described elsewhere.

Before the destruction of the Second Temple, Jewish worship was focused around animal sacrifices in the Temple; these activities are documented in the Book of Leviticus in the Torah. According to the Talmud (an ancient work of Jewish law), the major Jewish prayers were composed by the Men of the Great Assembly (fifth century BCE). After the destruction of the Second Temple and the beginning of the dispersion of the Jewish people, these prayers were crystallized. The first written Jewish prayerbook (siddur) can be traced to the ninth century BCE. The siddur has accompanied the Jewish people since.

Activity:

• **Introductory Discussion:** With your students, discuss the following conjecture: One might assume that after the Jews were exiled from Jerusalem in 70 CE and were forced to move elsewhere over the next centuries, they lost their connection with their homeland. In fact, the Jews maintained a close connection with the land of Israel throughout the almost 2,000-year diaspora. What are the sources of this connection?

Divide the class into 6-8 different groups of students. Give each group a different activity card (see below); each card analyzes a different prayer or holiday. For the first 15 minutes, each group will investigate how the above question relates to the information on their card. Then have each group present its findings to the class.

• **Discussion:** After the activity, ask for the students to speculate about how Jewish rituals, prayers and holidays served as a mechanism for maintaining and strengthening the connection between Jews and Israel throughout the centuries. It is important to note that until roughly the French Revolution (late 18th century), one’s Jewish

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identity was tightly connected with one's religious identity as a Jew (i.e., there were no "secular Jews" as there are today). Ever since the emancipation (late 18th century on), other forms of Jewish identification have emerged (e.g., many varieties of nonreligious Jews who still identify as Jews).

Wrap-Up: Despite the fact that Jews were exiled from their homeland after living there for over 1,000 years, they maintained a strong connection with it for the nearly 2,000 years of the diaspora up to the establishment of the modern state of Israel in 1948.

