“Gershom Mendes Seixas: A Leader in Difficult Times”

Lesson Plan by Leora Schaefer

Supplement One, Pages 4–5

In this imaginary interview with historical leader Gershom Mendes Seixas (pronounced say-shas), students will learn about the life of Jewish Americans during the Revolutionary War. In this lesson, students will write postcards to the future and past to consider how Jewish life in America has changed.

Objectives

► Students consider leadership in times of strife and the need for leaders to make difficult decisions.
► Students will explore the importance of religious freedom in America.
► Students will compare Jewish life in America from colonial times to the present and think about American Jewish communities of the future.

Find More Online

On www.babaganewz.com/teachers, you’ll find printable Hebrew and English versions of the Jewish Texts, helpful hyperlinks, and interactive student activities to enhance these lessons.

Quotes & Questions

“Although it was difficult to leave the synagogue and community where I grew up, I felt strongly that we needed to stand firm against the British. We could no longer tolerate their tyranny; instead, we needed to fight for the sacred cause of freedom. The New World gives Jews a chance for a new life—one of real civil and religious liberty.”

Why do you think Ḥazzan Seixas calls freedom a “sacred cause”? How did the New World give Jews a chance for a new life? How did American Jews experience civil and religious liberty?

Have you ever had to make a choice to do the right thing, even though it was difficult?

What other principles—like freedom—are worth fighting for?

“In all that I do, I actively seek to fight for liberty and against intolerance.... Everywhere I go, I try to teach others to be proud Jewish Americans.”

What are some ways that a person can fight for liberty and against intolerance today? Can you think of any leaders who do this?

What does it mean to be a “proud Jewish American”? What makes you a “proud Jewish American”?

“When I pray, I think of the fact that my ancestors risked so much to come over here and be such active Jews. They were among the first Jews to experience religious freedom in America.”

What do you think Jennifer’s ancestors risked to come here? Do you know how your ancestors came to America? What did they risk?

How do we experience religious freedom in America today?

“Gershom Mendes Seixas”

Ḥazzan Seixas’ first name, Gershom, is the name of Moshe and Tzipporah’s son who was born in Midian (see Shemot 18:3). The name Ger-shom literally means “a stranger there.”

Do you think that Ḥazzan Seixas felt like a stranger in America? Why or why not?

Activity: Postcards Through Time

1. Ask students to think about someone they consider a leader. This can be someone they know or they have never met, someone alive or deceased.

Think about this leader:

What qualities make this person a leader?

Did this person have to make any difficult decisions? If so, how did he or she handle it? If not, how do you think he or she would react in the face of a difficult decision?

Have some students share their responses with the class.

2. Explain that Ḥazzan Seixas was one of the first great leaders of the American Jewish community and that the article on pages 4–5 of Babaganewz American Jewish History Supplement One is an imaginary interview with him based on historic records.

3. Read the article and discuss the Quotes & Questions above.

What made Ḥazzan Seixas a great leader?

4. Study the Jewish Texts below about the relationship between a leader and the community.

5. Divide your class into two groups. Invite the first group to write a postcard back in time to Ḥazzan Seixas.

What is important to tell Ḥazzan Seixas about your life as Jews today? What advice would you seek from him?

Instruct the second group of students to imagine that they are Ḥazzan Seixas and have them write postcards to today’s American Jewish community.

What stories would he share? What advice would he offer?

On a blank piece of paper, have students design the postcards—drawing a picture of Jewish life today or in colonial America on one side and writing their message on the other.

Teaching Tip

If students want to include more information about life in colonial America, refer them to websites listed in the teachers’ section of www.babaganewz.com.

Jewish Texts

Yalkut Shimon, Bo, 187

If there were no flock, what need for a shepherd?

What do you think would have happened if Ḥazzan Seixas’ community had chosen not to follow him? Would he still be considered a great leader for his efforts? What does this passage teach us about leadership in general?

Yoma 87a

Someone who leads the people towards righteousness will not sin, and someone who leads the people towards sin will not be allowed to repent.

What does it mean that the leader who leads people toward righteousness will not sin? Does this mean that leaders have to be perfect? Was this the case with the Biblical leaders of our tradition? Why do you think that someone who leads people toward sin will not be allowed to repent? Do you think this is a final decree?