Jewish American Heritage Heroes

Jigsaw Research and Presentation Unit

HIGH SCHOOL EDITION | Grades 9-12

Jewish American Heritage Month (May) - Enrichment Unit

45 Figures - Arts - Science - Sports - Law - Business - Literature

Figures	45 Jewish Americans across arts, science and technology, sports, law, business, and literature
Duration	8-10 class periods (5-day shortened version available using pre-written profiles)
Structure	Jigsaw cooperative research and presentation
Group Size	Groups of 4-5 students; each student researches one figure
Final Product	3-5 minute presentation and completed research template
Heritage Month	Jewish American Heritage Month, proclaimed by Congress, observed each May

This unit celebrates the extraordinary contributions of Jewish Americans across every field of human endeavor. Students will discover that Jewish Americans have helped shape the nation in profound and lasting ways, often while navigating prejudice and discrimination. This is designed as an enrichment unit connected to Jewish American Heritage Month, recognized each May by Congress and the President of the United States.

TEACHER GUIDE

Important Note to Teachers

This unit is labeled a 'bonus lesson,' but it functions as a mini-unit requiring meaningful planning. With 45 figures, research, and presentations, students need structured support, clear expectations, and sufficient time. The pacing guide below is realistic. Compressing it significantly will undermine quality. A shortened 5-day version is possible using the pre-written figure profiles in place of independent research, with students annotating and answering guided questions rather than conducting open research.

Standards Alignment

California Common Core ELA Standards:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3 / RI.11-12.3 - Analyze how individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.7 / W.11-12.7 - Conduct short research projects

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4 / SL.11-12.4 - Present information clearly, logically, and with evidence

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.5 / SL.11-12.5 - Make strategic use of digital or visual media in presentations

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 / SL.11-12.1 - Initiate and participate in collaborative discussions

California History-Social Science Framework:

Supports integration of diverse American contributions across ethnic, religious, and cultural communities

Aligned with California Education Code Section 51204.5 - instruction on contributions of people of various backgrounds

Jewish American Heritage Month:

Proclaimed by Congress; observed each May

California Education Code supports recognition of cultural heritage months as part of inclusive curriculum

Consistent with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act and federal protections for ethnic and religious minorities

Pacing Guide

Day(s)	Activity	Notes
1	Launch: What is Jewish American Heritage Month? Brief overview of JAHM history. Introduce all 45 figures by category. Assign figures to students.	Allow students to browse the full list before assignments. Try to honor student interest where possible.
2-3	Guided research in class. Students complete research template. Teacher conferences with individual students.	Provide the curated resource list. Monitor for copy-paste; require paraphrase. Brief check-in at end of Day 2.
4	Students draft their presentations. Peer feedback in pairs using the rubric.	Distribute the rubric before drafting so students know exactly what is expected.
5	Jigsaw groups form. Presentation practice within groups.	Each student teaches their figure to the group. Groups should be mixed across categories.
6-7	Formal presentations. Option A: Small-group jigsaw only (lower stakes, all students present). Option B: Selected students present to full class.	Option A is recommended for most classes. Option B works well for honors or advanced students.
8	Synthesis discussion and written reflection.	Use the synthesis prompts provided. A one-paragraph written reflection makes a strong exit ticket.

Group Formation

Students should be arranged in groups of four or five. The teacher may assign specific individuals for research, allow for individual student choice, randomize assignments by picking names out of a hat, or use any other method that works for the classroom. The goal is for each jigsaw group to contain figures from multiple categories so that students hear about contributions across arts, science, sports, law, business, and literature. Suggested group assignments appear on a later page.

Differentiation

Scaffolding:	Use the pre-written profiles as the research base. Students annotate, paraphrase, and respond to guiding questions rather than conducting independent research.
Extension:	Require primary source research. Add a compare/contrast essay: How do two figures from different fields reflect shared Jewish American values?
ELL support:	Allow visual-heavy presentations. Pre-teach key vocabulary: contribution, legacy, heritage, innovation, justice, identity.
Special education:	Reduce template length. Allow recorded oral responses instead of written. Partner presentations permitted.

Synthesis Discussion Prompts

Jewish Americans appear in every category in this unit. What does that suggest about the relationship between minority identity and contribution to society?
Sandy Koufax chose not to pitch on Yom Kippur. Abraham Joshua Heschel marched for civil rights. What do these choices reveal about how individuals balance personal faith with public life?
Emma Lazarus wrote 'The New Colossus' in 1883. How do her words reflect Jewish American historical experience? Are they still relevant today?
Jonas Salk refused to patent the polio vaccine. What values might have motivated that decision? How does it compare to how medicine and technology work today?
Golda Meir was shaped by her American upbringing before she became an Israeli leader. How does immigration and identity complicate simple definitions of who counts as a 'Jewish American hero'?
Several figures on this list faced significant antisemitism or discrimination. How did they respond, and what does that tell us about resilience?

Suggested Research Resources

Official Jewish American Heritage Month website	https://jewishamericanheritage.org/
JAHM Resource Guide (2025, free PDF)	https://jewishamericanheritage.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/JAHM_ResourceGuide_rev2025_general.pdf
Eight free full-color JAHM posters (downloadable)	https://jewishamericanheritage.org/posters/
Jews in Hollywood - Academy Museum of Motion Pictures	https://www.academymuseum.org/exhibitions/hollywoodland
Weitzman National Museum of American Jewish History	https://theweitzman.org/home/
Jewish Book Council	https://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/
American Jewish Historical Society	https://www.ajhs.org/
American Jewish Archives	https://americanjewisharchives.org/

Library of Congress Jewish American Resources	https://www.loc.gov/collections/?fa=subject:jewish+americans
YIVO Institute for Jewish Research	https://yivo.org/
Tenement Museum	https://www.tenement.org/
The Forward Archive	https://forward.com/
Jewish Women's Archive	https://jwa.org/
My Jewish Learning	https://www.myjewishlearning.com/
Jewish Virtual Library	https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/
Unpacked for Educators (video-based Jewish content)	https://unpacked.media/
National Baseball Hall of Fame (Sandy Koufax)	https://baseballhall.org/
NASA - Judith Resnik	https://www.nasa.gov/
Nobel Prize website (Einstein, Wiesel, Dylan)	https://www.nobelprize.org/
USC Shoah Foundation	https://sfi.usc.edu/
Hadassah (Henrietta Szold)	https://www.hadassah.org/

ALL 45 FIGURES - CATEGORY OVERVIEW

Use this list when assigning figures. Consider student interests - engagement is higher when students connect personally with their figure.

Arts & Entertainment

1	**Stan Lee**	Co-creator of Spider-Man, the X-Men, the Avengers, and dozens of other Marvel Comics characters. Born Stanley Martin Lieber in New York City, Lee revolutionized American popular culture and storytelling for over 50 years.
2	**Timothée Chalamet**	Award-winning actor born in Manhattan to a Jewish mother of Russian and Austrian Jewish descent. Multiple Academy Award nominee known for Dune, Call Me by Your Name, and his portrayal of Bob Dylan in A Complete Unknown.
3	**Gal Gadot**	Best known for playing Wonder Woman, starring in the Fast and Furious franchise, winning Miss Israel 2004, serving in the Israel Defense Forces. She became an American citizen and one of the most internationally recognized actresses.
4	**Steven Spielberg**	One of the most influential filmmakers in history. Director of E.T., Jurassic Park, Schindler's List, and many others. Co-founder of DreamWorks. Deeply engaged with Holocaust remembrance through the USC Shoah Foundation.
5	**Bob Dylan**	Born Robert Zimmerman in Duluth, Minnesota. Singer-songwriter and poet who transformed American folk and rock music. Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first popular musician to receive the honor.
6	**Judy Blume**	Beloved author whose books, including Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret and Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing, have shaped generations of young readers. One of the most challenged authors in American library history.
7	**Adam Sandler**	Actor, comedian, and filmmaker born in Brooklyn. Known for blending broad comedy with genuine heart. His Hanukkah Song became a cultural touchstone celebrating Jewish presence in American entertainment.
8	**Mayim Bialik**	Actress best known for The Big Bang Theory and Blossom, who also holds a PhD in neuroscience from UCLA. A prominent advocate for science education and mental health awareness.
9	**Barbra Streisand**	The only artist to achieve number-one albums in six consecutive decades. Winner of Grammy, Oscar, Tony, and Emmy awards. Singer, actress, director. Activist in politics, women's rights, environmental protection, LGBTQ rights, civil liberties, and Jewish cultural institutions.
10	**Leonard Bernstein**	Composer and conductor who created West Side Story and served as music director of the New York Philharmonic. One of the greatest American musicians of the 20th century, he made classical music accessible to millions.
11	**Billy Joel**	Singer-songwriter and pianist from the Bronx, born to a Jewish father who fled Nazi Germany. Known for Piano Man, The Stranger, and decades of iconic American music. One of the best-selling music artists of all time.
12	**Gene Simmons**	Co-founder and bassist of the rock band KISS. Born Chaim Witz, he became an American citizen and one of rock music's most recognizable figures and savvy entrepreneurs.
13	**P!nk**	Grammy-winning singer-songwriter born Alecia Moore in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, to a Jewish mother. Known for powerful anthems about identity, resilience, and self-acceptance.
14	**Natalie Portman**	Academy Award-winning actress born in Jerusalem and raised in the United States from age three. Harvard graduate, activist, and one of the most respected performers of her generation.
15	**Jack Black**	Actor, comedian, and musician born in Santa Monica to Jewish parents. Known for School of Rock, Kung Fu Panda, and his band Tenacious D. Celebrated for bringing joy and musical passion to film.

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19	**Ralph H. Baer**	German-born American inventor known as the Father of Video Games. Created the first home video game console, the Magnavox Odyssey, laying the foundation for a global industry.
20	**Michael Dell**	Founder and CEO of Dell Technologies. Started his computer company from his University of Texas dorm room at age 19, revolutionizing the personal computer industry.
21	**Sam Altman**	CEO of OpenAI and one of the driving forces behind ChatGPT and modern artificial intelligence. Previously president of Y Combinator, the world's most influential startup accelerator.
22	**Mark Zuckerberg**	Co-founder and CEO of Meta. Created Facebook in his Harvard dorm room, building one of the most widely used communication platforms in human history.
23	**Sergey Brin and Larry Page**	Co-founders of Google. Their search engine, built as a Stanford research project, changed how the entire world accesses and organizes information.

Business & Innovation

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28	**Haim Saban**	Egyptian-born American media mogul who brought Power Rangers to American television and built a global entertainment empire. One of the most prominent Jewish philanthropists in the United States.
29	**Adam Neumann**	Israeli-born American entrepreneur and co-founder of WeWork. Now founder of Flow, a next-generation residential real estate company backed by major investors.
30	**Sheldon Adelson**	Built the Las Vegas Sands casino empire from scratch, becoming one of the wealthiest Americans. A major philanthropist supporting Jewish causes, Israel, and education.

Sports

31	**Aly Raisman**	Six-time Olympic medalist and captain of the 2012 and 2016 U.S. Women's Gymnastics teams. After her athletic career, became a powerful advocate against abuse in sports.
32	**Julian Edelman**	NFL wide receiver and Super Bowl champion with the New England Patriots. Named Super Bowl LIII MVP. A proud and visible ambassador for the Jewish community in professional sports.
33	**Amar'e Stoudemire**	Six-time NBA All-Star who later converted to Judaism and played professional basketball in Israel. A bridge between communities and a proud member of the Jewish people.
34	**Sue Bird**	Four-time Olympic gold medalist and WNBA legend who played her entire career with the Seattle Storm. Widely considered one of the greatest basketball players in history.

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36	**Sandy Koufax**	Hall of Fame pitcher for the Brooklyn and Los Angeles Dodgers. Widely regarded as one of the greatest pitchers of all time. Famously declined to pitch Game 1 of the 1965 World Series because it fell on Yom Kippur.

Law, Justice & Public Service

37	**Ruth Bader Ginsburg**	The second woman to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. Spent her career dismantling legal discrimination on the basis of sex. Became a cultural icon, RBG, beloved by millions.
38	**Louis Brandeis**	The first Jewish Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, appointed in 1916. Champion of privacy rights, free speech, and social justice. Called 'the people's lawyer.'
39	**Golda Meir**	Born in Kiev and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, she became an American citizen before emigrating to the land that became Israel. She went on to become Prime Minister of Israel, the first woman to lead a modern nation. Her American upbringing and values shaped her extraordinary leadership.
40	**Henrietta Szold**	Baltimore-born founder of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, still the largest Jewish organization in the United States. Also organized Youth Aliyah, which rescued thousands of Jewish children from Nazi Europe.
41	**Madeleine Albright**	The first woman to serve as U.S. Secretary of State, and for a time the highest-ranking woman in the history of the U.S. government. Born in Czechoslovakia, she came to America as a child and became a citizen. A trailblazing diplomat who brokered peace in Kosovo and expanded NATO. Her family's Jewish roots, hidden during the Holocaust to protect them, were discovered later in her life, a story of survival, identity, and resilience.

Literature & Journalism

42	**Elie Wiesel**	Holocaust survivor, author of Night, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Devoted his life to bearing witness to the Holocaust and ensuring it is never forgotten or denied.
43	**Emma Lazarus**	Poet whose sonnet 'The New Colossus' is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. Her words, 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,' define the American promise of welcome.
44	**Joseph Pulitzer**	Hungarian-born Jewish immigrant who became one of America's most influential newspaper publishers. Endowed the Pulitzer Prize, the highest honor in American journalism and letters.
45	**Abraham Joshua Heschel**	Rabbi, theologian, and civil rights activist. Marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama. Said: 'In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.'

SUGGESTED JIGSAW GROUP ASSIGNMENTS

Each suggested group contains figures from multiple categories. When students teach each other in jigsaw groups, the group will hear about contributions across arts, science, sports, law, business, and literature. Adjust assignments based on class size and student needs. For groups of four, remove one figure per group.

Group	Member 1	Member 2	Member 3	Member 4	Member 5
Group 1	Stan Lee	Albert Einstein	Sandy Koufax	Ruth Bader Ginsburg	Elie Wiesel
Group 2	Steven Spielberg	Jonas Salk	Sue Bird	Louis Brandeis	Levi Strauss
Group 3	Barbra Streisand	Judith Resnik	Mark Spitz	Emma Lazarus	Ralph H. Baer
Group 4	Bob Dylan	Mark Zuckerberg	Aly Raisman	Abraham Joshua Heschel	Rose and Morris Michtom
Group 5	Judy Blume	Sergey Brin and Larry Page	Julian Edelman	Ruth Handler	Mayim Bialik
Group 6	Adam Sandler	Sam Altman	Amar'e Stoudemire	Timothee Chalamet	Henrietta Szold
Group 7	Leonard Bernstein	Michael Dell	Gal Gadot	Golda Meir	Joseph Pulitzer
Group 8	Billy Joel	Ralph Lauren	Natalie Portman	Haim Saban	Madeleine Albright
Group 9	Gene Simmons	P!nk	Jack Black	Adam Neumann	Sheldon Adelson

Category Key by Group

Group	Categories Represented
Group 1	Entertainment (Stan Lee) | Science (Einstein) | Sports (Koufax) | Law (RBG) | Literature (Wiesel)
Group 2	Entertainment (Spielberg) | Science (Salk) | Sports (Bird) | Law (Brandeis) | Business (Strauss)
Group 3	Entertainment (Streisand) | Science (Resnik) | Sports (Spitz) | Literature (Lazarus) | Technology (Baer)
Group 4	Music (Dylan) | Technology (Zuckerberg) | Sports (Raisman) | Faith/Activism (Heschel) | Business (Michtoms)
Group 5	Literature (Blume) | Technology (Brin and Page) | Sports (Edelman) | Business (Handler) | Science (Bialik)
Group 6	Entertainment (Sandler) | Technology (Altman) | Sports (Stoudemire) | Entertainment (Chalamet) | Public Service (Szold)
Group 7	Music (Bernstein) | Technology (Dell) | Entertainment (Gadot) | Public Service (Meir) | Journalism (Pulitzer)
Group 8	Music (Joel) | Business (Lauren) | Entertainment (Portman) | Business (Saban) | Public Service (Albright)
Group 9	Music (Simmons) | Music (P!nk) | Entertainment (Black) | Business (Neumann) | Business (Adelson)

FOR STUDENTS: JEWISH AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH

What Is Jewish American Heritage Month?

Each May, the United States honors Jewish American Heritage Month, a recognition of more than 350 years of Jewish life in America. Formally proclaimed by Congress and the President, it is a time to learn about the contributions Jewish Americans have made to virtually every aspect of American culture, science, law, sports, and the arts.

A History of Contribution and Resilience

Jewish Americans have built this country alongside every other community, often while navigating antisemitism, discrimination, and, in the case of immigrant families, the trauma of persecution abroad. The 45 individuals in this unit represent a fraction of that legacy. They are scientists, artists, athletes, activists, inventors, entertainers, jurists, and entrepreneurs. Some are household names. Others you may be meeting for the first time.

What You Will Do

You will become an expert on one of these individuals. You will research their life, their achievements, and their legacy. You will prepare a short presentation to teach your classmates what you have learned. As you research, think not just about what your figure achieved, but about how their identity shaped their journey, and how their journey shaped America.

STUDENT RESEARCH TEMPLATE

Complete all sections using your research. Write in complete sentences. You will use this template to prepare your presentation.

Your Name:		**Date:**	
Figure Assigned:		**Category:**	

1. Background and Identity

When/where born? Family background? How did Jewish identity shape their life or work?

2. Field of Achievement

What field? Describe at least two major accomplishments with specific details.

3. Challenges and Resilience

What challenges and obstacles shaped the path to excellence? How did this person respond? What does this reveal about their character?

4. Impact and Legacy

How did this person change their field or American society? What is their lasting legacy?

5. Connection to Jewish Values

Tikkun olam (repair the world), tzedakah (justice/charity), pikuach nefesh (saving lives). Which apply? Explain.

6. Most Interesting Fact

What one fact will your classmates find most surprising or compelling?

7. Sources (at least three)

Title | Website or publication | Date accessed

PRESENTATION RUBRIC

Review this rubric before you begin preparing your presentation.

Criteria	Excellent	Proficient	Developing	Beginning
Content and Accuracy (30 pts)	28-30 pts: All facts accurate; rich detail; connects figure to broader historical and cultural context.	22-27 pts: Mostly accurate; adequate detail; some context provided.	15-21 pts: Some inaccuracies or vague information; limited detail.	0-14 pts: Significant errors; minimal information provided.
Research Quality (20 pts)	18-20 pts: Multiple credible sources; clear evidence of analysis, not copying.	14-17 pts: Multiple sources; mostly paraphrased.	10-13 pts: Limited sources; some copying evident.	0-9 pts: One source or plagiarism evident.
Organization and Clarity (20 pts)	18-20 pts: Logical structure; clear introduction and conclusion; easy to follow.	14-17 pts: Generally organized; minor gaps in flow.	10-13 pts: Somewhat disorganized; audience must work to follow.	0-9 pts: No clear structure.
Speaking Skills (15 pts)	14-15 pts: Confident and clear; eye contact; does not simply read notes.	11-13 pts: Mostly clear; some reading from notes.	8-10 pts: Hard to follow; mostly reads notes.	0-7 pts: Inaudible or very hard to follow.
Visual or Creative Element (15 pts)	14-15 pts: High-quality visual; directly enhances understanding of figure.	11-13 pts: Adequate visual; mostly relevant.	8-10 pts: Visual present but weak or loosely connected.	0-7 pts: No visual, or visual detracts from presentation.

Score Sheet

Category	Points Possible	Points Earned	Teacher Comments
Content and Accuracy	30		
Research Quality	20		
Organization and Clarity	20		
Speaking Skills	15		
Visual / Creative Element	15		
TOTAL	**100**		

FIGURE PROFILES - TEACHER REFERENCE AND SCAFFOLD OPTION

These profiles may be used as: (1) teacher background reference, (2) a reading scaffold for students who need support, or (3) the research base for the shortened 5-day version of this unit. Students using profiles should still paraphrase, annotate, and answer reflection questions, not copy.

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39	**Golda Meir**	Born in Kiev and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, she became an American citizen before emigrating to the land that became Israel. She went on to become Prime Minister of Israel, the first woman to lead a modern nation. Her American upbringing and values shaped her extraordinary leadership.
40	**Henrietta Szold**	Baltimore-born founder of Hadassah, the Women's Zionist Organization of America, still the largest Jewish organization in the United States. Also organized Youth Aliyah, which rescued thousands of Jewish children from Nazi Europe.
41	**Madeleine Albright**	The first woman to serve as U.S. Secretary of State, and for a time the highest-ranking woman in the history of the U.S. government. Born in Czechoslovakia, she came to America as a child and became a citizen. A trailblazing diplomat who brokered peace in Kosovo and expanded NATO. Her family's Jewish roots, hidden during the Holocaust to protect them, were discovered later in her life, a story of survival, identity, and resilience.

Literature & Journalism

42	**Elie Wiesel**	Holocaust survivor, author of Night, and Nobel Peace Prize laureate. Devoted his life to bearing witness to the Holocaust and ensuring it is never forgotten or denied.
43	**Emma Lazarus**	Poet whose sonnet 'The New Colossus' is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. Her words, 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,' define the American promise of welcome.
44	**Joseph Pulitzer**	Hungarian-born Jewish immigrant who became one of America's most influential newspaper publishers. Endowed the Pulitzer Prize, the highest honor in American journalism and letters.
45	**Abraham Joshua Heschel**	Rabbi, theologian, and civil rights activist. Marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, Alabama. Said: 'In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.'