

Our Names, Our Identity

Students uncover the stories behind their own names, explore Sephardic and Mizrahi naming traditions, and examine what happens to identity when immigrants keep, change, or lose their names

GRADE AND SETTING

Grades 6 to 8: public, independent, and Jewish schools; adaptable for grades 9 to 12

TIME

Two 45 minute class periods, plus a family interview at home

APPENDICES

A: The History of My Name
B: Names Lost and Names Kept
C: Sephardic and Mizrahi Names
D: Bio Poem

Overview

Names carry stories: a grandparent honored, a hope for a child's future, a city a family once called home. For Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, names in Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish, French, and Berber languages record centuries of history, and the moment of migration often put those names to the test. Children arriving in Israel in the 1950s were frequently given new Hebrew names by teachers, and immigrants to many countries changed their own names to fit in. In this lesson, students interview family members about their names, study Sephardic and Mizrahi naming traditions and surnames, analyze texts about names that were lost and names that were kept, and write a bio poem that tells their own story.

Essential Questions

1. What do our names mean to us, our families, and our communities?
2. Why do people keep, change, or lose their names when they move to a new country, and who gets to decide?
3. How can learning about one another's names help us honor the diversity of our communities?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Interview a family member and record the story, meaning, and origin of their name.
2. Identify common categories of Jewish surnames and give Sephardic and Mizrahi examples of each.
3. Compare Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi naming customs.
4. Analyze texts about immigrants whose names were changed, and distinguish names that were imposed from names that were chosen.
5. Write a bio poem that connects their name to their identity and family history.

Curriculum Connections

- **English Language Arts (Common Core):** RI.7.1 (cite evidence from informational texts); W.7.3 (write narratives); SL.7.1 (collaborative discussion).

- **Social Studies (C3 Framework):** D2.His.2.6-8 (change and continuity); D2.His.4.6-8 (factors that shaped people's perspectives); immigration and identity.
- **Jewish Studies (Jewish settings):** *Shemot*, the Book of Exodus; Jewish naming customs and Hebrew names; Sephardic and Mizrahi heritage.

Key Vocabulary

- **Given name:** a first or personal name chosen for a child.
- **Surname:** a family or last name passed down through a family.
- **Etymology:** the origin and original meaning of a word or name.
- **Onomastics:** the study of names.
- **Patronymic:** a name formed from a father's or male ancestor's name, such as Ben Haim, "son of Haim."
- **Hebraization:** changing a name into a Hebrew form, common in Israel's early decades.
- **Sephardic:** describing Jews whose families trace their roots to Spain and Portugal.
- **Mizrahi:** describing Jews whose families come from the Middle East and North Africa (from the Hebrew *mizrah*, "east").

Teacher Background

Jewish naming customs vary by community. Ashkenazi Jews generally name a child in memory of a relative who has died. Many Sephardic and Mizrahi families name children after grandparents whether living or not, often following a set order: the first son after the father's father, the first daughter after the father's mother, and the next children after the mother's parents. A grandparent may hear their own name called across the room by a grandchild, which many families see as a great honor.

Sephardic and Mizrahi surnames tell stories of place and work. Some recall cities in Spain (Toledano, from Toledo); others describe a trade in Arabic (Haddad, "smith") or Hebrew (Melamed, "teacher"), a quality (Elbaz, "falcon"), or an ancestor (Danialpour, "son of Daniel," in Persian). Personal names such as Messaouda ("fortunate"), Freha ("joy"), and Sultana were common among Moroccan Jewish women and reflect the Arabic speaking world in which these communities lived.

Migration often put names at risk. In Israel's early years, national leaders encouraged a new Hebrew identity. A 1950 order required state officials, especially those representing Israel abroad, to adopt Hebrew surnames, and many immigrant children from North Africa and the Middle East were given Hebrew first names at school, often without their parents' consent. Poet Sami Shalom Chetrit, who came to Israel from Morocco at age three, and novelist Eli Amir, who came from Iraq as a teenager, both wrote about this experience. In recent years, some Ethiopian Israelis who received Hebrew names on arrival have returned to their original Amharic names. Immigrants to other countries changed names too, but usually by their own choice. The popular story that officials at Ellis Island changed families' names is a myth: inspectors checked names against ship lists written in Europe, and most changes were made by immigrants themselves after they arrived.

Sources: My Jewish Learning, "What's in a Jewish Name?"; JIMENA, Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit, Jewish Language Project, Lesson 7; Smithsonian Magazine, "Did Ellis Island Officials Really Change the Names of Immigrants?" (2016); Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Poems in Ashdodian* (2003); Eli Amir, *Scapagoat* (1983).

Note to teacher: Names can be tender territory. Some students are adopted, live with guardians, use a name different from their legal name, or simply do not know their name's story. Offer every student a path: they may interview any trusted adult, research a name they admire, or write about a name in their

family. Never require students to share more than they choose. Before teaching, decide whether students will focus on given names, surnames, Hebrew names, or all three.

Materials

- Index cards, markers, construction paper or poster board for nameplates
- Devices with internet access for name research
- Handouts:
- [Appendix A: The History of My Name](#) (assign as homework before Day 1)
- [Appendix B: Names Lost and Names Kept](#) (one per student)
- [Appendix C: Sephardic and Mizrahi Names](#) (one per student)
- [Appendix D: Bio Poem](#) (one per student)

Procedures

Before the Lesson

- 1 **Family interview.** A few days before Day 1, send home Appendix A. Students interview a parent, grandparent, or other trusted adult about how their name was chosen and what it means.

Day 1. Introduction (15 minutes)

- 2 **Name cards (5 min).** Students write their name on an index card, as many times and in as many ways as they like, then add three words or phrases they connect with it. Model with your own: for example, "Tamar Zaken: Grandma Zilpa; date palm; hard to pronounce in America."
- 3 **Share (5 min).** In pairs, students share one story from their family interview. Volunteers share with the class. Ask: What do our names say about us? About our families? About where our families come from?
- 4 **Naming customs (5 min).** Explain that Jewish communities name children differently: many Ashkenazi families name after a relative who has died, while many Sephardic and Mizrahi families name after grandparents who may still be living. Ask: What might it feel like to hear your grandparent's name every time someone calls you?

Day 1. Body of the Lesson: Names Lost and Names Kept (30 minutes)

- 5 **"These are the names" (5 min).** Explain that the Hebrew name of the Book of Exodus, *Shemot*, means "names," after its opening words, which list the family members who went down to Egypt. Read Source 1 and Source 2 in Appendix B. Ask: Why might a text about slavery and freedom begin with a list of names? Why would a tradition credit keeping names with helping a people survive?
- 6 **Text stations (15 min).** In small groups, students read Sources 3 to 6: Sami Shalom Chetrit's classroom in Israel, Eli Amir's youth group, the Ellis Island myth, and names reclaimed. For each, they answer the questions on the page.
- 7 **Discuss (10 min).** Who decided to change each name? Was the change imposed or chosen? What was gained and what was lost? Why do you think the children in Chetrit's poem insisted on their old names "just a little longer"? Why does it matter that the Ellis Island story is a myth?

Day 2. Researching Our Names (25 minutes)

- 8 **Name detectives (10 min).** Using Appendix C, review the categories of Jewish surnames (place, trade, quality, ancestor, Hebrew and religious role) and the Sephardic and Mizrahi examples. Students sort the examples and try to classify their own surnames and given names.

- 9 Research and nameplates (15 min).** Students research their names using their interview notes, Behind the Name, and the ANU Museum's database of Jewish family names, and create a nameplate showing pronunciation, origin, meaning, the story of who chose it, and an image or symbol. Remind students that online name databases can contain errors and that family stories are evidence too.

Day 2. Conclusion (20 minutes)

- 10 Gallery walk (5 min).** Students display their nameplates and leave a sticky note on two classmates' nameplates with something they learned or a question.
- 11 Bio poem (15 min).** Using Appendix D, students write a bio poem that begins with their first name and ends with their last name, drawing on their interview and research. Volunteers read their poems aloud.

Assessment

- **Formative:** the family interview, Appendix B responses, and participation in discussion.
- **Summative:** the nameplate and bio poem. A strong nameplate includes accurate origin and meaning, the family story, and at least one source. A strong bio poem follows the structure, uses specific details from the student's life and name story, and shows reflection on identity.

Differentiation

- **Students who need support:** provide sentence frames for the interview and poem; allow drawing on the nameplate in place of some writing; pair students for research.
- **English learners:** invite students to write their names in their home languages and scripts and to share naming customs from their cultures.
- **Advanced learners:** research a family surname across several countries and languages, or compare Chetrit's poem with Eli Amir's scene and write about how each author presents the conflict.

Extension Activities

- **Beyond the Family Tree.** Use JIMENA's [Jewish Language Project](#), including [Lesson 7: What's in a Name?](#), to extend the study to family languages and a creative showcase.
- **Begin with a name.** JIMENA's oral history interviews begin by asking the meaning of the speaker's name. Watch a testimony from JIMENA's [Oral Histories](#) lesson and listen for what the name reveals.
- **Family name map.** Students map where their surnames, or the names in Appendix C, come from, and discuss what the map shows about Jewish migration.
- **Heritage display.** Combine nameplates with family objects in JIMENA's [All-Inclusive Heritage Museum](#) lesson.

Resources and External Links

- [Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit \(JIMENA\)](#)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/
- [Jewish Language Project: Beyond the Family Tree \(Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit\)](#)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/jewish-language-project/
- [Lesson 7: What's in a Name? \(Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit, PDF\)](#)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/lesson-7-whats-in-a-name.pdf
- [What's in a Jewish Name? \(My Jewish Learning\)](#)
www.myjewishlearning.com/article/naming-children/

- [The Memi de Shalit Database of Jewish Family Names \(ANU Museum of the Jewish People\)](https://dbs.anumuseum.org.il/skn/en/c6/e18493715/%D7%90%D7%95%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA/The_Memi_De_Shalit_Database_of_Jewish_Family_Names)
dbs.anumuseum.org.il/skn/en/c6/e18493715/%D7%90%D7%95%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA/The_Memi_De_Shalit_Database_of_Jewish_Family_Names
- [Behind the Name: Etymology](https://www.behindthename.com/glossary/view/etymology)
www.behindthename.com/glossary/view/etymology
- [Did Ellis Island Officials Really Change the Names of Immigrants? \(Smithsonian Magazine\)](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/ask-smithsonian-did-ellis-island-officials-really-change-names-immigrants-180961544/)
www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/ask-smithsonian-did-ellis-island-officials-really-change-names-immigrants-180961544/
- [Exodus 1:1, "These are the names" \(Sefaria\)](https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.1.1)
www.sefaria.org/Exodus.1.1
- [Vayikra Rabbah 32:5 \(Sefaria\)](https://www.sefaria.org/Vayikra_Rabbah.32.5)
www.sefaria.org/Vayikra_Rabbah.32.5
- [My Name Is: poetry lesson \(University of Arizona Poetry Center\)](https://poetry.arizona.edu/education/curriculum/my-name)
poetry.arizona.edu/education/curriculum/my-name