

THE WORLD THAT WAS JOSEPH SAMUELS: JEWISH LIFE IN BAGHDAD

Time: 60–75 minutes

Audience: Grades 6–12 (Middle School and High School)

Student Outcomes

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Understand what daily life was like for Jewish children in Baghdad in the 1930s
2. Explore themes of identity, belonging, language, and tradition within diverse Jewish communities
3. Analyze primary source materials (survivor testimonies and historical photographs) to understand historical context
4. Appreciate the diversity and richness of Mizrahi Jewish culture and heritage
5. Reflect on what is lost when communities are uprooted or erased, and consider the importance of preserving cultural memory

Aligned Standards (California Common Core)

English Language Arts:

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2** – Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.9** – Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.9 / W.11-12.9** – Draw evidence from texts and media to support analysis and reflection

History and Social Studies:

- **CA HSS Standard 10.9** – Students analyze the causes and consequences of major global conflicts and genocides of the 20th century

Visual Arts (Secondary):

- **VA:Re9** – Evaluate visual sources using multiple criteria, including historical significance, perspective, and purpose

Acknowledgment: This curriculum is a project of the California Teachers Collaborative for Holocaust and Genocide Education, established by the JFCS Holocaust Center, with support from the California Department of Education, Marin County Office of Education, the State of California, and the Diane & Guilford Glazer Foundation.

Context

This lesson introduces students to Holocaust survivor testimonies and artifacts as primary sources, using multimedia resources to engage learners in understanding the rich, vibrant world of Iraqi Jewish life before persecution intensified. Through Joe Samuels' personal narrative, students explore the concept of "the world that was" — a thriving community with its own distinct culture, traditions, and identity that was forever disrupted by rising hatred and violence.

Essential Understandings:

- Jewish communities existed and flourished throughout the world, not just in Europe
- The Holocaust and persecution of Jews extended beyond Europe to the Middle East and North Africa
- Individual stories and testimonies help us understand the human impact of historical events
- Cultural preservation and memory are acts of resistance and remembrance

Joseph Samuels Biography

Joseph Samuels was born in 1931 in the old Jewish neighborhood of Baghdad, Iraq. He was born into a close-knit family and grew up in a modest home shared by thirteen family members. Despite facing hardships, Joe remembers a warm and joyful childhood centered around Jewish traditions, holidays, and family. His father was a textile merchant who taught him the importance of respect for others, kindness, and faith. As a young boy, Joe was an eyewitness to the changing attitudes toward Jews during World War II, attitudes which even reached the Jewish communities of Iraq. In 1941, a pro-Nazi coup in Iraq, fueled by rising hatred and anti-Jewish propaganda, culminated in the Farhud, a violent pogrom (attack) against Baghdad's Jewish community. During the two-day massacre, Jewish homes and businesses were looted by mobs, many Jews were murdered, and widespread acts of brutality occurred. Joe was only ten years old but witnessed the terror firsthand as his family barricaded themselves inside their home. Joe remembers boiling oil in their roof to be used in the case of attackers entering their home and cried himself to sleep from the immense fear. His experience during the Farhud permanently altered his feeling of belonging and his identity and left him with the lasting impression that Iraq would no longer be a safe place for Jews.

British forces restored order, leading to temporary stability, but anti-Jewish persecution intensified again in 1948 after the establishment of the State of Israel. Iraqi Jews faced growing restrictions, arrests, and accusations of disloyalty. Joe, then 18 years old, excelled as a student and dreamed of becoming a nuclear physicist. He even earned an acceptance to study at the University of Southern California, but the government of Iraq denied him permission to leave the country. In 1949, Joe and his younger brother embarked on a dangerous journey to flee Iraq, by being smuggled to Iran. He remained for a brief time, helping other Jews escape Iraq, and then immigrated to Israel in 1950. He describes his arrival in Israel as the first time he truly experienced freedom. He went on to serve in the Israeli Navy, which he says helped him mature and develop lifelong habits of discipline and responsibility.

His new life in Israel was difficult, with poverty and financial instability, but he continued to work hard to reach his goals. In 1956, he immigrated to Montreal, Canada. Although finances kept him from continuing his studies in science, he worked hard to find success in real estate and construction. He met and married his wife and raised three children. In 1978, his family relocated to Los Angeles, where he continued to grow his property development business. He became deeply rooted in the American Jewish community, while maintaining pride and a connection to

his Iraqi Jewish heritage and traditions. For decades, he did not share his experiences during the Farhud, until he later took a memoir writing class and started sharing his story. In 2020, he published his memoir, *Beyond the Rivers of Babylon*, and later translated his book into Arabic to make his story accessible to readers in Iraq and the broader Arab world. He regularly speaks to students and other groups about his experience, shedding light on the ways that Nazi influence and hate reached the Middle East, and advocating for the preservation of the history of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa.

Materials

All materials are formatted as Google Slides (view-only or force copy) and Google Docs with "Anyone can view" permissions:

- [Google Slide Deck: Photos of Jewish neighborhoods, schools, marketplaces and video clips of Joe Samuels' testimony](#)
- [Handout 1: Joe Samuels' Childhood in Baghdad Worksheet](#)
- [Handout 2: Safe-In/Safe-Out Reflection Worksheet](#)
- [Handout 3: Preparing to Hear a Survivor Worksheet](#)
- Timeline of Key Events During the Holocaust (Provided Below)
- Glossary of Key Terms (Provided Below)

Glossary: Key Academic Vocabulary

Students should understand these terms before engaging with the lesson:

- **Mizrahi:** Jews with ancestry from ancient Jewish communities in the Middle East and North Africa. "Mizrahi" comes from the Hebrew word for "Eastern."
- **Farhud:** A violent pogrom against Jews in Baghdad, Iraq, on June 1–2, 1941. Influenced by Nazi propaganda, it marked the beginning of increased persecution of Iraqi Jews.
- **Pogrom:** The organized destruction of a certain group of people. Used to describe acts of violence and persecution against Jews throughout history. The word is derived from Russian, implying "havoc" and "to harm."
- **Persecution:** Systematic harassment, discrimination, or violence directed at a group of people.
- **Testimony:** A firsthand account or personal story, often given by a witness to historical events.
- **Primary Source:** Original documents, artifacts, or accounts created during or immediately after an event.
- **Identity:** The mix of traits, roles, experiences, beliefs, and cultural heritage that makes a person unique.
- **Diaspora:** The dispersion of a people from their homeland; refers to communities living outside their ancestral homeland.
- **Antisemitism:** Hostility toward or hatred of Jews as a religious or ethnic group, often accompanied by social, economic, or political discrimination.
- **Cultural Heritage:** The traditions, beliefs, customs, art, language, and values passed down through generations within a community or family.
- **Resilience:** The ability to recover from difficulty, adapt to change, and maintain core values and sense of self despite hardship.

See full glossary at the end of this lesson plan.

Differentiation

For English Learners:

- Provide vocabulary preview and word bank with key terms before the lesson
- Pair EL students with strong readers for Think, Pair, Share activities
- Offer simplified versions of text excerpts or use audio/visual supports
- Allow responses in home language during reflection activities, then translate to English
- Provide sentence frames for discussions (e.g., "Joe's childhood was unique because...")

For Students with Special Education Needs:

- Break the lesson into smaller segments with movement breaks between activities
- Provide graphic organizers to structure note-taking during the mini-lecture
- Use visual supports (pictures, timelines, diagrams) alongside text
- Offer choice in assessment format (written, oral, artistic, or multimedia response)
- Allow extended time for reading and reflection activities
- Pair students with peer mentors for collaborative work

For Accelerated Learners:

- Provide unedited excerpts from *Beyond the Rivers of Babylon* for deeper analysis
- Ask students to research and compare Jewish communities in other Middle Eastern countries (Syria, Yemen, Egypt, etc.)
- Challenge students to create a multimedia presentation connecting Joe's story to other survivor narratives
- Have students investigate the historical causes and consequences of the Farhud in greater depth
- Encourage students to consider how cultural memory is preserved and why it matters

Universal Supports:

- Provide clear, written instructions for all activities
- Use multimodal learning (visual, auditory, kinesthetic)
- Offer choice in grouping structures (pairs, small groups, whole class)
- Build in reflection time and opportunities for students to process emotions

Assessments

Students will demonstrate their learning through multiple assessments:

1. **Formative Assessment – Think, Feel, Learn, Remember ([Handout 3](#))** (during Introduction)
 - Students record initial thoughts and feelings about hearing a survivor's story
2. **Formative Assessment – Close Reading Worksheet ([Handout 1](#))** (during Close Reading activity)
 - Students answer guided questions about Joe's childhood experiences
 - Teacher circulates to monitor comprehension and identify misconceptions
3. **Summative Assessment – Exit Ticket / Reflection** (end of lesson)

- Students respond to: *"What surprised you most about Joe's childhood? What does it mean to remember 'the world that was'?"*
 - Options: Written response, quick sketch, or verbal response to a partner
4. **Optional Summative Assessment – Choice Board (select one):**
- **Written:** Write a short reflection essay (1–2 pages) addressing:
 - *"How would you describe Joe's childhood to someone who has never heard his story? What would you want them to understand about his life in Baghdad?"*
 - **Artistic:** Create a visual representation (drawing, collage, or digital art) of a moment from Joe's childhood, with a written explanation
 - **Multimedia:** Record a 2–3 minute podcast or video response to one of the guiding questions
 - **Comparative:** Create a Venn diagram comparing Joe's childhood experiences to those of a peer, highlighting universal themes (family, traditions, safety, identity)

Lesson / Activity: Step-by-Step Plan

Content Warning

Before beginning this lesson, provide students with the following context:

"Due to the themes of violence, hatred, and persecution that this lesson addresses, it is recommended that students receive advanced notice of the challenging nature of the subject. This lesson explores the Farhud, a violent attack on the Jewish community of Baghdad in 1941. While we will discuss this event, we will do so through the lens of a survivor's resilience and the importance of preserving cultural memory. This is part of an ongoing conversation about how hatred and prejudice affect communities. If at any point you feel you need to take a break, please let me know. Your wellbeing is important."

Introduction (10 minutes)

Step 1: Safe-In/Safe-Out Activity (5 minutes)

- Distribute [Handout 2: Safe-In/Safe-Out Reflection Worksheet](#)
- Explain: *"Before we hear Joe's story, we're going to create a safe space for this conversation. A 'Safe-In' is something that helps you feel grounded and ready to engage. A 'Safe-Out' is a strategy you can use if you need a break, or at the end of the lesson to help you process what you just learned."*
- Examples:
 - **Safe-In:** Deep breathing, sitting with a friend, having a water bottle, remembering why this story matters
 - **Safe-Out:** Asking to step out, raising your hand for a break, journaling quietly, moving to a designated calm space
- Students write 1–2 Safe-Ins and 1–2 Safe-Outs on their worksheet
- Collect these (keep on file; remind students of them throughout the lesson)

Step 2: Introduction to Survivor Testimonies (5 minutes)

- Explain: *"Today we're going to learn about Joe Samuels, a Holocaust survivor. His story*

is important because it helps us understand history through the eyes of someone who lived it. Survivor testimonies are primary sources—real accounts from real people. They help us see the human side of history."

- Show [Handout 3: Preparing to Hear a Survivor](#)
- Read aloud or have students silently reflect:
 - **Think:** What do you already think about this topic?
 - **Feel:** What emotions come up for you?
 - **Learn:** What do you hope to learn?
 - **Remember:** Why is it important to remember these stories?
- Students complete their worksheet individually (2–3 minutes)
- Optional: Invite 2–3 volunteers to share one word from their reflection

Opening Discussion (10 minutes)

Activate Prior Knowledge with Guiding Questions:

Ask students to think-pair-share on the following prompts:

1. *"What do you know about Jewish life before the Holocaust?"* (Allow 1–2 minutes for pair discussion; invite 2–3 responses)
2. *"Have you ever heard of Jews living in Iraq or other Middle Eastern countries?"* (Clarify misconceptions: many assume all Jewish history centers on Europe)
3. *"What do you think life was like for a Jewish child in Baghdad before World War II?"* (Encourage predictions based on what they know about the time period)



Teacher Note: Use responses to gauge student background knowledge. If students lack context, briefly mention:

- Iraq is in the Middle East; Baghdad is its capital
- Jewish communities have existed throughout the world for thousands of years
- The 1930s was a time of rising hatred and political instability globally

Mini Lecture & Visual Tour (30-40 minutes)

Present using the [Google Slides Presentation](#):

Step 1: Historical Context (10–12 minutes)

- **Jews in Iraq Since the Babylonian Exile**
 - Jews have lived in Iraq for over 2,500 years (since the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE)
 - Baghdad had one of the largest and most vibrant Jewish communities in the Middle East
 - By the 1930s, roughly 150,000 Jews lived in Iraq
- **Coexistence and Community Life**
 - Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived together in neighborhoods, worked together, and participated in the broader Iraqi society
 - The Jewish quarter had its own synagogues, schools, markets, and cultural institutions
 - Jews spoke Arabic at home and in public, while also maintaining Hebrew and Jewish traditions

- **Flourishing Culture**

- Rich traditions in music, literature, business, and scholarship
- Distinct Mizrahi Jewish identity with unique customs, foods, and celebrations
- Show photographs of synagogues, schools, marketplaces, and streets

Step 2: The World That Was – Photo Tour (8–10 minutes)

- Display photos from Joe's book and historical archives showing:
 - Jewish neighborhoods and alleyways
 - Synagogues and schools
 - Family gatherings and celebrations
 - Markets and daily life
- Narrate: *"These are the streets and spaces where Joe Samuels grew up. He played in these alleyways, attended school here, celebrated holidays with his family. This was his world."*

Step 3: Video Clip – Joe Samuels Speaking (10–15 minutes)

- Show video clips of Joe Samuels describing his childhood
- Alternative: Read aloud a brief excerpt from his memoir with expression and warmth
- After viewing/listening, ask: *"What stood out to you? What emotions did you notice?"*
- Allow 1–2 minutes for processing

Close Reading (15-20 minutes)

Step 1: Distribute [Handout 1](#) & Assign Groups (2 minutes)

- Divide students into small groups (3–4 students per group)
- Assign each group one of the following excerpts/themes:
 1. Playing in the alleys of Baghdad
 2. Speaking Judeo-Arabic at home and maintaining Jewish traditions
 3. Shabbat and family traditions
 4. School life and education
 5. Fears and confusion during the Farhud

Step 2: Think, Pair, Share – Close Reading (10–12 minutes)

- **Think (2 min):** Students silently read their assigned excerpt and underline key phrases or details that stand out
- **Pair (4 min):** Within their group, students discuss:
 - What is Joe describing?
 - What emotions or details stand out?
 - What questions do you have?
- **Share (4–6 min):** Each group shares 1–2 key insights with the whole class

Guided Questions for Groups to Consider:

- *"What aspects of his childhood feel familiar to you?"*
- *"What makes his experience unique to Baghdad?"*
- *"What emotions does he express in this passage?"*
- *"How does this passage help you understand his world?"*



Teacher Note: Circulate among groups to monitor comprehension, ask clarifying questions, and support discussions. This is an opportunity for formative assessment.

Whole-Class Debrief & Reflection (10-15 minutes)

Step 1: Bring Class Together (2 minutes)

Transition: *"Now let's bring everything together. What have we learned about Joe's childhood and the world he lived in?"*

Step 2: Reflection Questions (8–10 minutes)

Facilitate a whole-class discussion using the following prompts:

1. *"What surprised you most about Jewish life in Baghdad?"*
2. *"Why is it important to remember 'the world that was' before persecution and violence?"*
3. *"How do we carry forward cultures that have been disrupted or lost?"*
4. *"What does Joe's story teach us about identity, belonging, and resilience?"*

Facilitation Tips:

- Use wait time (allow 5–10 seconds of silence for thinking)
- Affirm student responses and build on their ideas
- If discussion lags, share a brief personal reflection or re-read a powerful passage
- Encourage students to build on each other's ideas: *"Who can add to what [student name] said?"*



Step 3: Exit Ticket / Closing Reflection (5 minutes)

Distribute an **Exit Ticket** (can be digital or paper):

"Choose one to respond to (2–3 sentences):"

- *What surprised you most about Joe's childhood in Baghdad?*
- *What does it mean to remember 'the world that was'?*
- *Why do you think Joe decided to share his story decades later?"*

Students can respond in writing, draw a quick sketch, or respond verbally to a partner (teacher can take notes).

Collect exit tickets to:

- Assess student understanding
- Identify misconceptions to address in future lessons
- Inform next steps and differentiation

Supplemental Resources

Primary Source Collections:

- [USHMM Holocaust Encyclopedia – Mizrahi Jews](#): Information on Middle Eastern Jewish communities
- [Yad Vashem – The World Remembers](#): Survivor testimonies and historical documentation
- [Iraqi Jewish Archive](#): Digital collection of documents, photographs, and artifacts from Iraqi Jewish communities
- [Beit Hatfutsot – Museum of the Jewish People](#): Virtual exhibitions and resources on global Jewish diaspora communities, including Mizrahi Jews

KEY TIMELINE OF THE HOLOCAUST



Glossary

Allied Forces: The coalition of countries that fought against the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan) during World War II (1939–1945). The core Allied powers were the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and China. Their victory ended the war and led to the formation of the United Nations.

Antisemitic/Antisemitism: Hostility toward or hatred of Jews as a religious or ethnic group, often accompanied by social, economic, or political discrimination.

Aryan/Aryanism: The term the Nazis developed to identify the “pure, German race.” It was used to describe non-Jewish objects and people. Jews who had “Aryan papers” often possessed forged documents to hide their identity. Failure to produce valid documents could lead to arrest or worse.

Ashkenazi: Jews descended from medieval Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe. They developed distinct religious customs, spoke Yiddish, and make up the majority of the global Jewish population today. The community was heavily impacted by the Holocaust.

Bar Mitzvah: A Jewish coming-of-age ceremony for boys at age 13, marking their religious and moral responsibility. The female equivalent is Bat Mitzvah, usually at age 12 or 13.

Child Survivor: An individual who was under the age of 18 either at the start or end of the Holocaust and survived under extraordinary circumstances.

Concentration Camp: Camps used by the Nazis for imprisonment, forced labor, and mass murder of Jews and others. There were over 40,000 camps and ghettos across Europe.

Cultural Heritage: The traditions, beliefs, customs, art, language, and values passed down through generations within a community or family.

Death Camp: Six camps in Nazi-occupied Poland (Auschwitz-Birkenau, Treblinka, Sobibor, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek) where mass exterminations were carried out, mostly of Jews.

Diaspora: The dispersion of a people from their homeland; refers to communities living outside their ancestral homeland.

Farhud: A violent pogrom against Jews in Baghdad, Iraq, on June 1–2, 1941. Influenced by Nazi propaganda, it marked the beginning of increased persecution of Iraqi Jews.

Genocide: Coined by Raphael Lemkin in 1944, the term describes the deliberate, systematic attempt to destroy a group of people, often based on race, religion, ethnicity, or nationality.

Ghetto: Originally from 16th-century Venice, the term was later used by the Nazis to describe confined urban areas where Jews were forced to live before being deported to camps.

Hanukkah (Chanukah): An eight-day Jewish holiday celebrating the rededication of the Second Temple and the miracle of oil lasting eight days. Celebrated with menorah lighting and traditional foods.

Hatikvah: Hebrew for “The Hope,” it is Israel’s national anthem, expressing the Jewish longing to return to and live freely in their ancestral homeland.

Holocaust: The systematic, state-sponsored genocide of 6 million Jews and millions of other minorities by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945.

Identity: The mix of traits, roles, experiences, beliefs, and cultural heritage that makes a person unique.

Kosher: Jewish dietary laws (Kashrut) outlining which foods are permitted and how they must be prepared and consumed.

Ladino: A Judeo-Spanish language historically spoken by Sephardic Jews. It combines medieval Spanish with Hebrew, Turkish, and other regional languages.

Mizrahi: Jews that trace their ancestry to ancient Jewish communities that have existed for millennia in the Middle East and North Africa. "Mizrahi" comes from the Hebrew word for "Eastern."

OSS (Office of Strategic Services): A U.S. intelligence agency formed during WWII to conduct espionage and support resistance movements. Predecessor to the CIA.

Passover (Pesach): A Jewish holiday commemorating the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt. Celebrated with a Seder meal and the telling of the Exodus story.

Persecution: Systematic harassment, discrimination, or violence directed at a group of people.

Pogrom: The organized destruction of a certain group of people. Used to describe acts of violence and persecution against Jews throughout history. The word is derived from Russian, implying “havoc” and “to harm.”

Primary Source: Original documents, artifacts, or accounts created during or immediately after an event.

Purim: A joyful Jewish holiday celebrating the events in the Book of Esther, when Jews were saved from persecution in ancient Persia. Marked by costumes, charity, and feasts.

Refugee: A person forced to flee their home country due to war, persecution, or disaster. Protected under international law.

Resilience: The ability to recover from difficulty, adapt to change, and maintain core values and sense of self despite hardship.

Sephardic: Jews descended from the Iberian Peninsula. After expulsion from Spain and Portugal, they settled in areas like the Ottoman Empire and spoke Ladino.

Shabbat: The Jewish Sabbath, a day of rest and worship from Friday evening to Saturday evening, marked by candle lighting, meals, and prayer.

Star of David: A symbol of Judaism that was used by Nazis to mark and isolate Jews during the Holocaust, requiring them to wear yellow or blue stars in public.

Stereotype: A fixed, oversimplified belief about a group of people that ignores individual differences.

Synagogue: A Jewish house of worship where services, prayer, and community gatherings are held.

Testimony: A firsthand account or personal story, often given by a witness to historical events.

World War I: Also called “The Great War,” it lasted from 1914 to 1918. It introduced modern warfare and left Europe politically and economically destabilized. The harsh Treaty of Versailles led to conditions that helped fuel WWII.

World War II (WW2): A global war from 1939 to 1945 involving most of the world’s nations. Fought between the Axis and Allied powers, it resulted in massive destruction, the Holocaust, and significant geopolitical changes.

Yiddish: A language spoken by Ashkenazi Jews, combining Hebrew, German, and Slavic elements. It was widely used in Eastern Europe before the Holocaust.

Axis Powers: The alliance of Germany, Italy, and Japan during WWII. They sought territorial expansion and were defeated by the Allied Forces in 1945.

References

Beit Hatfutsot – Museum of the Jewish People. Virtual exhibitions and resources on global Jewish diaspora communities. Accessed June 15, 2026. <https://dbs.anumuseum.org.il/skn/en/c6/bh>.

Hillel Shulewitz, Malka. *The Forgotten Millions: The Modern Jewish Exodus from Arab Lands*. Continuum, 2001.

Iraqi Jewish Archive. Digital collection of documents, photographs, and artifacts from Iraqi Jewish communities. Accessed June 15, 2026. <https://ijarchive.org/s/iraqi-jewish-archive/page/home>.

Rejwan, Nissim. *The Last Jews of Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland*. University of Texas Press, 2004.

Samuels, Joseph. *Beyond the Rivers of Babylon: My Journey of Optimism and Resilience in a Turbulent Century*. 2020.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Mizrahi Jews." Holocaust Encyclopedia. Accessed June 15, 2026. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/>.

Yad Vashem. "The World Remembers: Survivor Testimonies." Accessed June 15, 2026. <https://www.yadvashem.org/>.

