

Jewish Literacy

The concept of Jewish literacy is at least as old as the Torah. According to the words of the Torah, it is incumbent on parents to teach their children mitzvot and pass on the Torah's teachings (Deuteronomy 6:7).

Over time, the bounds of Jewish literacy have expanded. Historically, Jews have lived not only in Israel but throughout the world; and, as Jews have spread out and moved to new places, they have developed numerous local traditions and customs including different languages (like Yiddish and Ladino), varied liturgical and non-liturgical types of music, ethnic cuisines, and folklore.

Today, being literate in the various Jewish customs from around the world provides different Jewish communities with opportunities to come together and to find deeper meaning in what it means to live a Jewish life.

My Own Thoughts About Jewish Literacy

בְּן זֹמָא אוֹמֵר,
אֵיזְהוּ חֲכָם, הַלּוֹמֵד
מִכָּל אָדָם, שְׁנֵאָמַר
מִכָּל מְלַמְדֵי
הַשְּׂכֵלְתֵי כִי עֲדוֹתֶיךָ
שִׂיחָה לִּי.
(פרקי אבות ד: א)

Ben Zoma said: Who is wise? He who learns from everyone, as it is said [in Psalms 119:99] "From all who taught me have I gained understanding."
(Pirkei Avot 4:1)

Some Important Reference and Consultation Resources

- [National Library of Israel for Educators](#)
- [The Jewish Encyclopedia](#)
- [Sefaria](#)
- [Morfix](#)
- [Yad Vashem - Education](#)

- Take learners to the congregation library and show them the variety of books (dictionaries, sacred books, reference, fiction, non-fiction, liturgy, philosophy, magazines). If the congregation has no library, ask the Rabbi to invite learners to his/her study room
- Expose learners to different types of Jewish music, languages, and cuisines. If appropriate for your community, host a festival in which learners (and their families) can taste different cuisines.
- Passed-down wisdom can be a good way to understand how societies approach the world around them. Teach learners Yiddish and Ladino proverbs, so they become more familiar with those communities.
- Conversations are a great way to strengthen bonds within communities. Have learners interview members of the community about their backgrounds and family traditions. This can be especially enlightening in communities whose members come from a variety of backgrounds (Yemenite, Iraqi, Moroccan, Persian, etc.)
- Music can connect people and shed light on a community's outlook. Have learners listen to traditional liturgy sung to different tunes. For example, around Passover, learners can Listen to [Mah Nishtanah](#) in 21 different traditional melodies.
- Tell learners they are heading a committee for the local Jewish Federation. They are tasked with writing a proposal to increase the Jewish literacy in their city. Encourage learners to think about what they would recommend based on what they know and also what they would like to know.