Educator's Guide

Jewish Life in the Shtetl

If you've ever watched Fiddler on the Roof or Yentl, you may already have an idea of what the shtetls — small Jewish market towns in pre-WWII central and Eastern Europe — were like.

From 1791 to 1917, Russian Jews were confined to shtetls in an area called the Pale of Settlement. Their communities suffered from antisemitic attacks, pogroms, and rampant poverty. Despite this, spirituality flourished in the shtetls and they became the birthplaces of both the Hasidic and Mussar movements as well as the Volozhin yeshiva, the model for the modern yeshiva.

After the failed first Russian Revolution of 1905, over 50,000 Jews were murdered in pogroms in only four years. Fearing for their safety and looking for new opportunities away from the shtetls, around two and a half million Jews emigrated from Russia signaling the end of an era for Russian Jewry.

Lesson Plan designed by Dr. Neil Rubin.

Link to video

Further Learning

1. Joellyn Zollman, What Were Shtetls? | My Jewish Learning
2. Facing History: Understanding The Life Of Shtetl Jews: Lesson: Understanding the Life of Shtetl Jews | Facing History
3. Mariam Nirenberg, Yiddish Song From the Shtetl
4. Joshua Rothenberg, Demythologizing the Shtetl
5. Jewish Life In The Shtetls, History: Jewish Life in the Shtetl
6. Dafna Dolinko, The Shtetl: Between Myth and Reality : a Yad Vashem Podcast
7. Yoel Rappel, Dafna Dolinko, The Shtetl: Between Myth and Reality : a Yad Vashem Podcast
8. Cnaan Lipshiz, Filmmakers constructed an acre-sized shtetl for a Ukrainian WWII film. Now they want to preserve it as a museum. - Jewish Telegraphic Agency

Review Questions

1. What were Eastern European shtetls?
    a. mixed Jewish-Gentile villages
    b. villages that didn't allow Jews
    c. poor Jewish villages rich with Jewish life
    d. small cities with Jews

2. What was the Pale of Settlement?
    a. Where Jews lived in Germany.
    b. Where Jews were forced to live Eastern Europe
    c. A contract between Jews and the Russian Czar
    d. A special European residence card for Jews

3. Despite much poverty, why did few starve in shtetls?
    a. food was cheap
    b. diets were simple
    c. generous Tzedakah (charitable) donations
    d. money from American Jews

4. What impact did the 25-year army service have on Jewish men?
    a. They didn't know their children
    b. They fled the country
    c. Many stopped being Jewish
    d. They became career soldiers

5. What innovation helped spread religious study?
    a. lowering costs for yeshivas
    b. hiring more rabbis
    c. The first printing press in Yiddish
    d. **Making yeshiva education available to any boy**

Discussion Questions

1. The video discusses how poverty in the shtetl era could reach as high as a remarkable 33%. Yet, there was little starvation because of the Jewish concept of tzedakah, or "righteous giving," often translated as "charity." With such hunger in so many places in our era, could this concept of tzedakah work today if all countries were asked to use it? Why or why not?

2. The video explores how young Jewish boys would be drafted into the Czar's army for 25 years. The chances of being killed in war were high, particularly as Jews

were not seen as valuable and were often on the front line. Also, there was heavy antisemitism from other soldiers. If the Jewish soldiers survived, few would want to stay Jewish and return home. To avoid this, some literally cut off their trigger finger so they couldn't serve; some fled to America, but their families could be punished for their desertion. How would you respond to being drafted in that time?

3. When Jews came under Russian control in the late 1790s, the Russian and Polish non-Jews in their areas made it clear they despised Jews, people whom they had heard negative stories about for centuries. Knowing that the government would never see Jews as equal to non-Jews, how might you try to co-exist with non-Jewish populations?

4. The video discusses the rise of the yeshiva movement. The best male students often traveled from home to such schools, living with host families while learning from sunrise until past sunset. Back home, other boys went to crude one-room schools called *cheders*. (Girls would learn at home from their mothers.) Boys often stayed in yeshivas and cheders until they got married. Then they took peasant jobs to support their growing family. What advantages and disadvantages did this system create?

5. After centuries of a thriving culture of family, learning and religion, Jews increasingly faced the deadly violence of pogroms. They hid and ran as non-Jews pillaged their homes. Then the early Zionists challenged this response, preaching self-defense and living in Israel as the only path to Jewish safety and freedom. Religious leaders rejected the Zionists for disregarding the wait for deliverance from the Messiah. Others turned to socialism and even communism, preaching humanity's universal nature – while fighting those who felt otherwise. What impact do you think this struggle made on Jewish life?

Learning Activities

1. Utilize our ready-made lesson plan on Jewish Life in the Shtetl.

2. Read these sections of the article "Shtetl" from the YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews of Eastern Europe, "Introduction," "Origins Of The Shtetl," and "The World Of The Shtetl." Come up with a list of the positive and negative characteristics and attributes of shtetls. In teams of two to four, one team presents one why on balance shtetl life – despite the violence of pogroms – was positive for Jews, while the other team then presents on why ultimately shtetls were bad for Jewish life. Then have a class discussion on the matter.

3. Read this article about Yiddish today. Using these basic Yiddish expressions, create a dialogue between several friends (in English but using these words and phrases and others you might know). Students will use at least 10 Yiddish words below to talk about something in their life today. For example: "*Oy vey*, I sure could use a *nosh* – maybe a knish or two!"

4. Create a one-act play in which the last residents of an eastern European Jewish shtetl discuss with teens today their memories of shtetl life a century ago -- fears, joys, and what they hope was their legacy. What messages would the shtetl residents want to share? What would be their hope for future Jewish generations? How would the teens react? For a guide on how to create a one-act play, watch this brief video.

5. Play our Kahoot about Shtetl life here!

Reflection Questions

1. If you could travel back in time to your ancestors' home in the shtetl, the mellah (Jewish neighborhoods in Muslim cities) or elsewhere, what advice would you give your ancestors when it comes to keeping treasured traditions or discarding others to prepare for life in our world ? Do you think they could adjust to modern Jewish life? Could you adjust to their life?

2. How should we remember shtetl life now? Was it a time of great educational innovation, religious growth and Jews helping other Jews? Or was it a painful experience of poverty, fear and little opportunity? On balance, was shtetl life ultimately a positive or negative experience for Jews?

3. Some Jewish communities today seem to want to recreate shtetl life by living in insular communities in large cities and even their own towns. This is particularly true for some Hasidic groups (Hasidim). Yet, they must balance today's technology with the desire to preserve their ancestors' lifestyle. A Shabbat elevator – which stops on every floor without a button being pushed – is one example. Is it possible now to keep the learning, tzedakah and observance of the shtetl era? Is it harder, easier or the same? Give specific examples.