

## **Acts of Citizenship: American Jews and Military Service** A Cincinnati Museum Center and Online Exhibit

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*Exhibit Panel Correlation:* “Acts of Citizenship”; “Prejudice and Response”

*Ohio Standards Correlation*

People in Societies Standard                      Grade Eight                      Points 2, 6

### **Introduction**

As the title of this portion of the exhibit suggests, military service is an “act of citizenship.” By being willing to shed blood on behalf of the United States, soldiers demonstrate their willingness to pledge their “lives, fortunes, and sacred honor” to their society. This notion of loyal citizenship was central to the formation of the first Jewish community in what would become the United States; as Amsterdam Jews appealed for the right of 23 of their brethren to remain in New Amsterdam (New York), they wrote that “the Jewish nation in Brazil have at all times been faithful and have striven to guard and maintain that place, risking for that purpose their possessions and their blood.”<sup>1</sup> Throughout American Jewish history, American Jews served their country in devotion and their service was painstakingly documented and widely publicized as a manifestation of their fidelity to their nation.

The willingness to die for American ideals on the battlefield segues naturally into a struggle to live out those ideals fully. Thus, another form of an “act of citizenship” that arises in wartime is the full exercise of political rights. When the Jews of northern Mississippi and Paducah Kentucky were expelled as a result of General Ulysses S. Grant’s General Order No. 11, Jewish leaders appealed successfully to President Abraham Lincoln to have the order revoked. In the Civil War, after the appeal of Isaac Leeser, a prominent Jewish leader of the era, Jewish chaplains were appointed to serve in army to meet the needs of Jewish soldiers. From World War I on, the Jewish Welfare Board became the nationally sanctioned agency responsible for catering to the social and religious needs of American Jewish soldiers. All of these examples exhibit the power of citizens to effect change in the context of war.

Fighting in wartime brings new meaning to the religious identity of the soldier. American Jewish colonists took note of the timing of the American Revolution near the festival of Passover, both celebrations of freedom. Similarly, for American Jewish soldiers who practiced their Judaism in army camps, the symbolism of the holidays had new meaning, whether it be the Passover celebration of freedom or the High Holiday themes of the passing of judgment who shall live and who shall die. American Jewish soldiers used the holidays as times to connect to their families on the homefront as well as a time to bond with their new “families,” their brothers and sisters in arms.

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<sup>1</sup> “Amsterdam Jewry’s Successful Intercession for the Manhattan Immigrants, January 1655” in Jacob Rader Marcus, ed., *The Jew in the American World*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 30.

Military service facilitated the revitalization of one's own faith and fostering opportunities for interfaith dialogue and cooperation. Through religious wartime experience and new partnerships, war brought to the forefront visions of how the postwar world might look, both in terms of religion and the larger society.

The "Acts of Citizenship" exhibit displays in living color the three themes expressed above:

Theme #1: How is military service an expression of loyalty and devotion to one's country?

Theme #2: Does war lead citizens to realize fully their constitutional and civil rights?

Theme #3: How is religious faith symbolized in wartime artifacts?

### **Pre-Exhibit Activities**

Before visiting the exhibit, students should discuss the three themes mentioned above. The following is a list of ways to grapple with these themes. These activities can be done in isolation or in any combination:

1. Through classroom conversation, students should generate lists connected to the three themes. The first list would consist of reasons why people fight in wartime. The second list would note the central causes of the major wars of the exhibit (Civil War, World War I, World War II, Korea, Vietnam) and the types of civil rights and American ideals that are most closely associated with those causes. The third list would include the main themes of Jewish holidays and how those themes might connect to wartime. All of these lists would be collated and typed to create a checklist for students to use as they visit the exhibit.
2. The "From Haven to Home" web site <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/haventohome/> will be helpful to students as part of the conversation. In particular, the section on "Challenges" includes a number of objects related to Jews and the Civil War.
3. A great way to grapple with the themes is to watch the World War II section of the A&E documentary *Hollywoodism: Jews, Movies, and the American Dream*. It addresses why Jewish movie moguls chose to assert their patriotism at the time (theme 1), how they grappled with anti-Semitism (theme 2), and their vision for a postwar world (theme 3).
4. For the first theme, high school students might examine the letter by Amsterdam Jews (see Appendix A) mentioned above to show that the issue of loyal citizenship has its roots in the beginning of American Jewish history. Students will find artifacts related to the second and third themes at the Cincinnati Museum Center exhibit.

## **Exhibit Activity**

1. Students should bring to the Cincinnati Museum Center the checklists generated in the pre-exhibit activity.
2. At the Cincinnati Museum Center: Students should examine Grant's Order No. 11 and its accompanying documents, as well as the material connected to the "Four Chaplains" narrative. Students should analyze these documents and others on the military service panel using their checklists and the three theme questions. How do these artifacts relate to each of the themes?
3. Online: As background or in conjunction with these documents, the teacher can provide students with information from the Jewish War Veterans site: [www.jwv.org](http://www.jwv.org). In particular, teachers should consult the following site on Jews and World War II: [http://www.mjhnyc.org/exhibitions\\_online.htm](http://www.mjhnyc.org/exhibitions_online.htm). One interesting account of the Four Chaplains story can be found at [www.fourchaplains.org](http://www.fourchaplains.org). Students should also examine the artifacts associated with Jewish soldiers celebrating the holidays – these can be found on the American Jewish Archives website.
4. It would be ideal to have one Jewish veteran (or a group of veterans) walk with the students through parts of the exhibit and relate the pieces to their personal experience with chaplains, Jewish holidays, anti-Semitism, etc. Ideally, this could be a group from different wars (World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, etc).
5. Students could conclude the day with a question and answer session with these veterans, comparing their checklists and the artifacts with the realities of the soldier experience.

## **Post-Exhibit Activities**

1. This theme lends itself most naturally to an oral history project. Students could interview family members or neighbors who served in wartime to see how their experience relates to the issues raised by the exhibit. It would be ideal to interview veterans from a range of faith communities so that some comparative history could be done. The YMCA and Knights of Columbus might be helpful here for their experience in meeting the needs of Protestant and Catholic soldiers in wartime.
2. A second possible post-exhibit activity would be to assess the themes in light of the current situation in Iraq. Students could contact the Jewish Welfare Board and Jewish press to see how they are addressing religious questions today. Students could analyze the continuities and discontinuities between the wars.

3. Students could try to contact chaplains and soldiers in Iraq directly to interview them about these themes.

## **Appendix A – Excerpt from “Amsterdam Jewry’s Successful Intercession for the Manhattan Immigrants, January 1655”**

To the Honorable Lords,  
Directors of the Chartered West India Company,  
Chamber of the City of Amsterdam

The merchants of the Portuguese nation [the Sephardic Jewish community] residing in this City [of Amsterdam] respectfully remonstrate to your Honors that it has come to their knowledge that your Honors raise obstacles to the giving of permits or passports to the Portuguese [Sephardic] Jews to travel and to go to reside in New Netherland, which if persisted in will result to the great disadvantage of the Jewish nation. It can also be of no advantage to the general Company but rather damaging.

There are many of the nation who have lost their possessions at Pernambuco and have arrived from there in great poverty, and part of them have been dispersed here and there. [Pernambuco, or Recife, the stronghold of Dutch Brazil, was captured by the Portuguese, January 1654.] So that your petitioners had to expend large sums of money for their necessaries of life, and through lack of opportunity all cannot remain here [in Holland] to live. And as they cannot go to Spain or Portugal because of the Inquisition, a great part of the aforesaid people must in time be obligated to depart for other territories of their High Mightiness the States-General [the Dutch government] and their Companies, in order there, through their labor and efforts, to be able to exist under the protection of the administrators of your Honorable Directors, observing and obeying your Honors’ orders and commands. [The West India Company owned the young Dutch colony of New Netherland.] It is well known to your Honors that the Jewish nation in Brazil have at all times been faithful and have striven to guard and maintain that place, risking for that purpose their possessions and their blood. [The Jews distinguished themselves in the defense of Pernambuco, remaining there until its fall in 1654.]