

**American Jews and Civil Rights**  
A Cincinnati Museum Center and Online Lesson

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**Introduction**

*Exhibit Panel Correlation:* “Minority Rights and Majority Rule”

*Ohio Social Studies Standards Correlation:*

History	Grade 10	Point 14
People in Societies	Grade 10	Point 1
People in Societies	Grade 10	Point 4

*Background*

Over the past three centuries, American Jews have committed themselves to numerous political and social causes, both at home and abroad. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American Jews were particularly active in the movements associated with civil rights (at home) and Soviet Jewry (abroad). Jewish involvement in civil rights occurred during the 1950s and early 60s, while Jewish support for the struggle of their Soviet coreligionists began in the late 1960s and continued through the 1980s. This shift in the focus of American Jewish activism signifies a larger ideological move during this time from universalism to particularism in community politics. This lesson introduces students to the American Jewish role in both the Civil rights and Soviet Jewry movements, and in the process, invites them to explore varieties of political activism as well as changing goals of community politics over time.

*Themes*

Equality, Tolerance and Intolerance, Responding to Injustice, Communal Responsibility

*Learning Objectives for Students*

Students will explore some of the social issues that the United States grappled with in the 1960s

Students will learn about American Jewish involvement in the Civil rights movement

Students will learn about American Jewish involvement in the Soviet Jewry movement

Students will consider responsibilities of an ethnic/racial/religious minority group to itself and toward others

Students will consider the process of change in communal politics.

### **Pre-Exhibit Activity**

Introduce or refresh students' memories on the definition of civil rights and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Afterwards, begin a conversation in class about civil rights strategies. Ideally, minority groups can all work together in a *universalist* manner to promote civil rights for everyone. However, in many cases groups ultimately adopt a *particularist* approach, focusing their resources on civil rights for their own communities. Acquaint students with these terms prior to visiting the exhibit.

Students might consider:

- Strategically speaking, what benefits accrue from a *universalist* approach?
- What challenges or complexities might exist from a *universalist* approach?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of focusing on more specific, ethnic-related concerns (the *particularist* approach)?
- What examples of civil rights leaders or movements in history can be identified as *universalist*, *particularist*, or some combination of the two? Students might think locally, nationally, or internationally.

### **Exhibit Activity**

1. At the Museum Center: Watch Rabbi Joachim Prinz' speech at the March on Washington as a means of introduction to American Jewish participation in the civil rights struggle. The speech can be found at the endcap of the "Minority rights and Majority Rule" case.

*Background on Rabbi Prinz (from text panel in From Haven to Home):*

Joachim Prinz (1902-88) came to the United States in 1937 after the Nazi government formally expelled him from Germany. In the United States, he assumed the pulpit of Temple B'nai Abraham in New Jersey in 1939. In addition to his congregational work, Prinz was active in national and world affairs, joining the executive board of the World Jewish Congress in 1946. He also served as president of the American Jewish Congress from 1958-1966. Prinz was active in social issues, including the civil rights movement throughout the 1960s, being one of the ten founding chairmen of the 1963 March on Washington for civil rights. Prinz spoke at the August rally, appearing on the podium just moments before Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech. Earlier, in April 1960, Prinz led a picket line in front of a Woolworth store in New York City, protesting discrimination against African Americans at lunch counters in southern states.

*Background on the March on Washington:*

On August 28, 1963, more than two hundred thousand demonstrators gathered at the Lincoln Memorial to take part in the March on Washington. A coalition of civil rights organizations planned the march to demonstrate to the entire nation that a gap existed between the tenets of American democracy and the everyday experience of Black Americans. During this march, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream"

speech. The march was successful in pressuring the Kennedy administration to commit to passing federal civil rights legislation.

After viewing the speech, students should consider the following questions (additional viewings may be necessary for students to craft their answers):

What does Rabbi Prinz say about collective responsibility?

What connections does Rabbi Prinz make between Jewish history and the African-American experience?

What does Rabbi Prinz say is “the most urgent, the most tragic” world problem?

What is his suggested solution to this problem?

Rabbi Prinz’ approach to civil rights was typical of the *universalism* that characterized community politics in the early 1960s. What is universalism? Cite three specific examples of universalism in Prinz’ speech.

2. At the Museum Center: Examine the civil rights movement documents and photographs in the exhibit. There will be a photograph of Rabbi Prinz with President Kennedy as well as a video of Prinz’ March on Washington speech. Students can refresh their knowledge of Prinz’ message, if necessary.

3. Online: examine the other civil rights documents related to Soviet Jewry to see how the language and imagery of this movement was similar to and/or different from the language and imagery conveyed by the documents, photographs and video of Jewish involvement in the American civil rights movement.

Specifically, students should look at

Poster: Free Soviet Jewry

Letter: From the Jewish War Veterans proclaiming a Free Soviet Jewry Day

Poster: “Let My People Go: Dance for Freedom in Solidarity with Soviet Jews (1976)

Consider the following questions:

There are several similarities in language between Rabbi Prinz’ speech and the Soviet Jewry documents. What words or ideas appear in both contexts?

What forms or modes of political activism (speeches, marches, rallies, etc.) are portrayed in the civil rights movement materials? The Soviet Jewry materials?

How do the images presented in the photographs of Jews and civil rights differ from the images presented in the Soviet Jewry posters? (hint: who is represented?)

What is unique or different about the Soviet Jewry materials, when compared to the civil rights movement materials?

What could these similarities and differences indicate about shifts in the Jewish community's focus? In Jewish community politics?

The Soviet Jewry movement is indicative of the *particularism* that began to characterize community politics in the late 1960s/early 1970s. Based on your observation of the materials in the exhibit and your answers above, what is particularism?

### **Post-Exhibit Activity**

Students will take the information that they learned in the pre-exhibit and exhibit activities and use it to think critically about current and future civil rights activism.

Civil rights issues change over time. The Soviet Jewry movement, for example, was successful in its efforts to convince the Soviet government to allow Jews to emigrate. As a result, the plight of Soviet Jewry faded from the forefront of Jewish communal politics and was replaced by new communal concerns, like, for example, Jewish feminism.

Have students brainstorm a list of current civil rights concerns.

Then direct them to the Anti-Defamation League's website ([www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org)) to view current "hot topics" in civil rights on the civil rights Front Page ([http://www.adl.org/civil\\_rights/](http://www.adl.org/civil_rights/))

Students should examine one or two articles on this page and consider whether they reflect universalism or particularism.

Finally, students can discuss what issues they think are missing from the ADL civil rights Front Page and how they would like to change the direction of political activism in the future.