



## ACTIVITY

### Jewish Portraits

#### Goal

The aim of this activity is to focus the participants' thoughts upon specific kinds of Jews who are different from each other and to examine the question of what living a Jewish life means.

How do the participants see these figures and are they all living Jewish lives in the opinion of the students? What are the criteria for deciding these things? The attempt is made here to move the students towards a philosophical position on the question of the character of the Jewish collective.

#### Materials Needed

Cards with the portraits of different types of Jews. One set of cards for each small group.

#### Time Needed

30-40 minutes

#### Directions for Activity

Here are a group of portraits of different kinds of contemporary Jews. Choose some or all of these portraits and put them onto separate cards. Make a number of copies of each card according to the number of groups into which you wish to divide the students.

1. **DAVID. AGED 50**  
Jewish businessman from England – feels very warm about being Jewish. Not exactly religious but enjoys synagogue whenever he can go. Does not ride or touch money on Shabbat, but watches television and turns on lights etc. Has a kosher home. Has two children who went on Aliyah to Israel. He was not keen on them going since it broke up the family, but since they are there he goes to visit once a year. Makes a financial donation to Israel and to many Jewish charities every year.
2. **AVRAHAM. AGED 45.**  
Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jew. Married with six children. Lives in the Me'ah Shearim district of Jerusalem (the most ultra-orthodox area). His family has lived in Jerusalem for seven generations. He is a member of an extreme group which does not recognize the State of Israel, seeing it as a product of human effort rather than a state that has been created by God, and moreover is a state which is not run according to halacha (Jewish law). In his everyday life he speaks Yiddish, believing that Hebrew is the language that should be reserved for communication between people and God. He studies for several hours every day and gives money for Tzedaka within his community.
3. **SONIA. AGED 70.**  
Born in Warsaw to a fairly assimilated family. Lived in the Warsaw ghetto until 1942 and then escaped and lived in a monastery until the end of the war. She then went to live in Lodz where



she lives today. There she married a non-Jew from whom she has since been divorced. Has very little contact with the other Jews who lived in Lodz. She believes that being Jewish has only brought her bad things in life.

4. INA. AGED 38.

A doctor living in Zagreb, Croatia. In World War II her parents were active in the resistance and her father was high up in the Communist party. She received no Jewish education but about ten years ago began to become very interested in Jewish culture and history. Spends much time cataloguing the Jewish graves of Zagreb. Volunteers for a few hours every week for work in the Jewish old-age home.

5. ROBERTO. AGED 25.

Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Grew up in a Zionist youth movement and came on Aliyah three years ago because of strong Jewish commitment. Joined a young kibbutz in the north of Israel and is helping to build it up. Works very hard and is enthusiastic about the future of his kibbutz. He enjoys the chagim (festivals) programs on the kibbutz which are prepared by the cultural committee. However, if the committee did not prepare them he would not notice that the chagim were passing him by. He is consciously improving his Hebrew all the time.

6. DIANE. AGED 27.

Born to wealthy Jewish parents in New York. She belongs to a Jewish sports club. Married to a non-Jewish lawyer. She felt uneasy about it but felt that in this world “love conquers all”. She wants to bring up her future children as Jews because she felt that she enjoyed her childhood. Says that when she has children she will light candles on Friday nights because she thinks that it is a pretty tradition. For herself, she does not feel particularly Jewish. She does not light candles now.

- Divide the students into sub-groups. Explain that you are going to give a number of contemporary Jewish figures to each group and that you want the group to discuss each of the figures and to examine the Jewish character of the life that each of the figures leads. According to the opinion of the members of the group, to what extent do they think that each of these figures is living a Jewish life? Emphasize that the question is not “How Jewish are the figures?” They are each a hundred per cent Jewish. In addition the question does not relate to the ethical character of the figures. For the purpose of the exercise they are each completely ethical. The question relates only to the students’ opinion of the Jewish character of the life that they lead.
- Let each group see if they can put the figures into order according to the question of the degree of Jewish life led.
- Now discuss with the group the choices that they have made. The two crucial questions in this exercise are as follows:
  1. Is it possible to rank Jews according to the degree of a Jewish life that is being led? If it is not possible, in the view of the group or individuals within the group, why is it not possible for them to do so?
  2. If it is possible, what are the criteria according to which such a choice can be made?

This is by no means an easy set of questions. The question of judging others is extremely controversial today for many young people. Nevertheless they should be pushed to do this. If they feel that they cannot, then they should be pushed to justify this as a philosophical position and they should be given extreme cases (“Jews for Jesus”, “Jews who acted against their people and became informers in the ghettos of World War Two” etc.) to test their positions. Are such people still living Jewish lives according to those in the group who might feel that it is impossible to take a stand on the question of living a Jewish life?



The question that we are trying to get to is whether or not it is possible to define what living a Jewish life actually means for the members of the group. What are the criteria that they believe are central in the world of today to define what living a Jewish life actually means? There are many possible criteria that they might bring up. If they do not bring them up, you, the educator, might want to bring them up yourself. Our suggestion is that it is not the task of the educator to impose a pre-ordained set of criteria on the group, but rather to examine their perspective on the question, by raising questions that make them sharpen and justify their ideas. Here are a number of possible criteria that you or they might want to consider as elements in living a Jewish life.

1. **HALACHIC.** The more a person lives a life of Halacha, the more Jewish that life is.
2. **THEOLOGICAL.** The more elements of traditional belief in a Jewish concept of God there are in a person's life, the more...
3. **ZIONIST.** The more a person lives a life connected to Israel, the more...
4. **SOCIAL.** The more that a person lives a life surrounded by and interacting with Jewish people, the more...
5. **COMMUNAL.** The more that a person is involved in a meaningful relationship with a Jewish community, the more...
6. **CULTURAL.** The more elements of Jewish culture there are in a person's life, regardless of religious belief or practice, the more...
7. **SERVICE.** The more a person contributes to the Jewish community in which she or he lives, the more...
8. **INCLUSIVE.** The more a person welcomes all other Jews as legitimate and tries to connect with other Jews, the more...
9. **CONTINUITY.** The more that a person tries to pass down Jewishness to another generation, the more...
10. **SUBJECTIVE FEELING.** The more that a person identifies with Jews and feels him or herself to be Jewish, the more...
11. **LEARNING.** The more Jewish knowledge a person has in her or his life, the more...

To these eleven criteria it is certainly possible to add others. The aim of the discussion is to encourage the development of a consistent philosophical position on an individual basis.

- Finally, ask each participant to write a third person description of themselves in Jewish terms in the same way that the six figures above are described. How Jewish a life do they think that they themselves are leading?