Ellie Benjamin

**Walking Rabbi Benjamin’s Journey**

Overview and Purpose:

Judaism is often associated with two countries: the United States of America and Israel. However, when those who identify with this ancient religion are considered in light of Indian Ocean trade, the multinational presence Jewish peoples is apparent. The life of Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish traveler who lived during the Medieval Period, testifies to the geographic span of Jewish influence throughout the area of the Indian Ocean. Rabbi Benjamin serves as a crucial example of a Sephardic Jew, (as he was from Spain), outside of the realm simply of trade and instead in the field of exploration and cultural understanding. In reviewing Rabbi Benjamin’s story, students of history are required to push back against stereotypes of Jews in the Middle Ages as uniformly oppressed. In learning Rabbi Benjamin’s story, students must think about the economic and social repercussions the exclusion of Jews from the feudal system while understanding, too, the wealth of experiences that Middle Age Jews lived. Rabbi Benjamin was indeed uniquely a traveler whose journey was arguably primarily concerned with understanding global Jewish communities and the social standing of Jews around the world. Through his writings, Rabbi Benjamin asks his audiences to consider the daily reality of Jews in the Middle Ages, a depiction that frequently challenges anti-Semitic stereotypes and dominant narratives of interreligious conflict.

Students undertaking this lesson should ultimately understand how they, themselves, can be historians. Students can piece together potential activities the rabbi undertook and items he might have encountered. Students are likely accustomed to studying materials that cannot be historically verified, whether religious texts or travel logs, like those of Ibn Battuta. However, the historicity of Rabbi Benjamin’s records should at least help students to understand the plurality of concerns held by Jewish people at this time, even though the Jewish story might be told rarely to those learning about the Middle Ages.

Note: Both the Medieval Period and the Middle Ages are consistently referred to throughout this lesson. The Medieval Period or Era is constituted of the years between 300 and 1450 CE, as the Indian Ocean in World History website indicates. The Middle Ages spanned from the fifth century to the fifteenth century.

Performance Objectives

* Push students to consider whether something must be verifiable to be important to study historically (i.e. the Bible, or, in this case, the story of Rabbi Benjamin).
* Challenge students to reconsider the dominant historical narratives of the Middle Ages, particularly in regards to interreligious interaction.

Materials needed

Note: n=number of students in the class

* Large globe or world map
* One computer for teacher
* Projection device for computer
* N copies of marked, unlabeled maps (found below)
* At least n/3 computers for students
* N pieces of paper, divided into four groups with a quarter about each topic in part I
* N copies of quiz in part III

Part I – Understanding the Lives of Medieval Period Jews

* The teacher should divide students into four groups. Each group will be assigned one of the four below categories of Medieval Jewish life, either political status, social status, geography, or economic status.
* Give the members of each group a piece of paper with the below information solely about their respective topic. Give students fifteen minutes to meet with their groups, to read their paper, and to plan a presentation for the class regarding their topic.
* Give each group of students five minutes, at maximum, to present about their topic. Ask that, during each presentation, every group member shares a piece of information, and that all audience members take notes when their own teams are not presenting.
* The four groups, along with the pieces of information about each topic, should be as follows.
* Religious status
  + Jews were largely expected not to claim ‘undue’ power.
  + Jews living under Medieval Western Christendom were highly dependent on governmental authorities, a dependence that could eventually lead to despoliation and expulsion.
    - In Medieval Western Christendom, Jews faced major pressure from churches to limit Jewish life as well as church-sponsored missionizing campaigns.
  + Jews were and are considered by Muslims to be “people of the book (*ahl al-kitab*),” and the two groups coexisted in the Middle Ages.
    - As part of the *dhimma* (protected) policy, Jews were required to recognize Islam’s superiority via the jizya, or poll tax. In addition, Jews were expected to maintain a "low profile" by not proselytizing or having public religious ceremonies.
  + There was a religious awakening that saw the rise of rabbinic scholars such as Rashi, Maimonides, and Nachmanides.
    - Rashi (1040-1105) – a medieval French Rabbi who wrote commentaries on the Talmud and the Tanakh (Jewish bible). Rashi was known for his ability to present a text’s meaning in concisely, which made his work accessible to learned scholars and beginning students.
    - Maimonides (1135-1204) – a medieval Sephardic Jewish philosopher. The most influential Torah scholar of the Middle Ages. He was also a renowned astronomer and physician, worked in North Africa, and influenced prominent Arab and Muslim scientists and philosophers.
    - Nachmanides (1194-1270) – a major medieval Catalonian Jewish scholar. He helped to re-establish the Jewish community in Jerusalem after it was destroyed by the Crusaders in 1099.
* Social status
  + In the Medieval Period, Jews were typically ruled by Islamic or Christian leaders, regardless of where in Europe they lived. Their position was precarious – it was subject to what local rulers and the general public thought of the Jews.
  + Almost all Jews living in Christian Europe existed outside the standard power structure.
    - The Medieval Period's social structure was predicated on a feudal land-based system. It was generally illegal for Jews to own land. As a result, they existed outside of this system as a "other" group. Neither lord nor peasant, but something else.
  + Jews living in Christian lands faced restrictions on marriage, a requirement of wearing clothing marking them as Jewish, and pogroms, which were often begun by anti-Semitic rumors, and were often carried out by crusading Christian armies. Jews were sometimes viewed as threatening to society. Jews living in Medieval Western Christendom in particular faced societal hostility grounded in the sense that Jewish people were newcomers.
    - Jews were the target of blood libels, the first of which was in Norwich, England. A blood libel is an accusation against Jews claiming that they kidnapped and murdered Christian children to use their blood for Jewish rituals. During the Medieval period, blood libels were a major tool used to persecute Jews living in Europe.
  + In Islamic lands, Jews were known as *dhimmis*, which meant that they were protected. *Dhimma* literally means protection.
    - The dhimma policy guaranteed freedom of religion, movement, and non-interference in communal activities as long as *dhimmis* lived up to basic demands i.e. that they pay an annual poll tax (*jizya*). However, Jews still had fewer rights than other citizens.
    - Living areas were mixed. There were no ‘Jewish quarters’ and people interacted constantly in the marketplace.
    - Jews were allowed to have their own courts for "personal law." This included marriage, divorce, inheritance, and contracts between Jews.
    - Many Jews could speak Arabic, which made it easier for Muslims and Jews to respectfully debate together the interactions of philosophy and theology.
* Economic status
  + Jews became money-lenders because of religious restrictions for Christians to engage in usury. This prohibition, in addition to Jews inability to own land, left them few other economic opportunities. Although the profession of money-lending ultimately proved lucrative and portable, Christian authorities considered it to be disreputable, an idea that allowed for further social ostracism of Jews.
    - Jews in Medieval Western Christendom experienced constricted economic activities.
  + Because Jews could not take Christian oaths in the Middle Ages, they could not participate in feudal or manorial systems. This in turn limited the career options for Jews to those of artisan (although it was difficult for Jews to join guilds), trader, or money-lender.
  + Advances in agrarian techniques and a resulting agricultural surplus led to the rise of cities and larger urban populations, which allowed for the opening of international trade routes and the creation of immense wealth. Jewish merchants constituted a critical segment of this trade, particularly as the Jewish Diaspora allowed for wide-reaching trade networks. The earliest Jewish trading routes extended from France in the West to the Pacific shores of China in the East.
    - The above Jewish merchants primarily carried commodities that were small and in high demand, including spices, perfumes, jewelry, and silk.
  + The success of Jews in trade was aided by enmity between Christianity and Islam. Since the Islamic states of the Middle East and North Africa and the Christian kingdoms of Europe often banned each other's merchants from entering their territories, the Jewish merchants and traders functioned as neutral intermediaries, keeping open the lines of communication and trade between the lands of the old Roman Empire and the Far East.
  + In the Islamic-ruled world, Jews were involved in a wide range of economic activities, partly because the Muslim world was, from early on, an urban, commercialized society. Jews and Muslims were drawn into international commerce at the same time. Business partnerships led to social bonds.
* Geography
  + During the Middle Ages, the Islamic empire held power over Jewish communities in places including Toledo, Grenada, Seville, Constantinople, Salonika, Baghdad, Cairo, and Jerusalem.
  + By the year 1000, Christian-controlled parts of Europe housed only a tiny proportion of world Jewry. The majority of Jews lived in the Islamic world. The largest Jewish communities on European soil were in the areas of Southern Europe under Islamic rule.
  + By the year 1500, many Jews had been expelled from Western Europe. This fact is due in part to the occurrence of pogroms, forced conversions, and expulsions beginning in the 1200s. This led to an ethnic divide (Ashkenazic vs. Sephardic Jews). Many of the Jews who fled the inquisition in the 15th century found refuge in the Islamic Ottoman Empire.
    - Ashkenazic – denotes a member of the Jewish Diaspora population that initially gathered in the Holy Roman Empire (Central Europe).
    - Sephardic – denotes a member of the Jewish Diaspora population that initially gathered around the Iberian Peninsula (the area of Spain and Portugal).

Part II – Introducing Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela

* Randomly assign students with partners so that everyone in the class is in a group of two or three. Each group should have one computer. Have the Indian Ocean in World History website’s map page already pulled up on each computer, along with a tab to the left of this page with the following website pulled up: <http://wpd.ugr.es/~proyecto_viajeros/recursos/textos/judios/tudela_asher_1840.pdf>
* Ask students to type the word “Jewish” into the website’s map section’s search engine. Ask students to look quickly through the different items on the map tied to Jewish people (those that should appear, aside from Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela, should be one haplogroup, a Jewish merchant, the Mappilas, Cochin, and Bombay). Ask that students explain what they see as common threads throughout Jewish ties to each of these items.
* Students should notice that one common thread among the items generated by this search is a link to trade or to merchants. Explain to students this common thread if students do not find it, themselves. Then, point out to students how the story of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela deviates from this pattern.
* Ask students to select the Medieval Era Map and to hover their computer mouse around until they find the icon labeled ‘Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela.’ This icon is located in modern-day Iraq, but the teacher should wait for the students to find the location themselves. In doing so, students will automatically explore a bit about what else was going on during this time period, between 300 CE and 1450 CE, such as the use of incense burners in Oman, which is located in the South of the Arabian Peninsula.
* Ask students to read the description of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela and to write a list with their group of what seems unique about this man and that which he recorded. Below are some ideas.
  + Rabbi Benjamin wrote of Baghdad’s 1,000 peaceful, comfortable, and honorable Jewish inhabitants who are ruled by a Muslim ruler (Abbasid Caliphate).
  + He describes how one Jewish elite was Rabbi Daniel, a sort of prince who descended from King David, and who Muslims address as a noble descendant of David’s. Rabbi Benjamin explains his yearly income, great wealth, scholarly background, and hospitality.
  + Rabbi Benjamin traveled the Mediterranean, leaving Spain in 1159 CE to return in 1172. He lived in Tudela, a city and municipality in Northern Spain.
* Ask students to click on the tab to the left of the IOWH maps tab on their computer, which should be pre-loaded onto each computer. Explain to students that they are looking at the book of recordings that Rabbi Benjamin made about his journey. Inform students that the English record of the rabbi’s journey can be found on pages 31-165 of the document and instruct students to skim through any number of those pages for ten minutes.
* Involve students in a discussion about why, given the social and economic positions of many Jews in the Middle Ages as well as the wide spread of Jews across the Indian Ocean area at that time, Rabbi Benjamin wrote in such detail about the wealth, academia, and power of so many of the Jewish communities he encountered.
* Ask the below questions and use the attached examples, as well. Students should sit once again with their topic groups from part I to discuss the answers to these questions. Note: There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, particularly at the level of school years to which this lesson is aimed. However, below each question are some ideas for possible answers.

<http://wpd.ugr.es/~proyecto_viajeros/recursos/textos/judios/tudela_asher_1840.pdf>

* + Why does Rabbi Benjamin mention the number of Jews living in different cities? (“Baghdad… contains twenty-eight Jewish synagogues.” 104)
    - To testify to the resiliency of Jews in different areas due to their resolve to remain living where they were living prior to any systemic exclusion and to underline how, to Rabbi Benjamin, so many Jews were visibly Jewish.
  + Why does he mention by name those Jews who were the most prominent in specific cities?
    - To demonstrate that any Jew’s rise to prominence in one place was not unique, but in fact made such a person part of a bigger global network.
  + Why does he compare different peoples in terms of how they treat Jewish people and how they identify with Jewish people?
    - Because he had already heard about or borne witness to public persecution of Jews and wanted to keep a record for himself and for future generations of how interreligious interaction, in particular, can precipitate persecution by one person or group of a separate religious group.
  + Why does he so heavily emphasize Jews that he views as pious or impious? (P. 58)
    - Because so many Jews in the Middle Ages were forced to choose between identifying as Jewish and being killed or converting to Christianity. Therefore, it is possible that, to Rabbi Benjamin, piety equates to a type of loyalty that would sustain Jewish communities for years to come.
  + Why does he explicitly describe the wealth and academic prowess of some Jews? (“Many of the Jews of Baghdad are good scholars and very rich” 104)
    - To demonstrate that, even while suffering exclusion from the feudal system in Europe, Jews have been able to achieve something beyond what would be defined as serfdom in the feudal paradigm.
  + Why is he so keen on describing the material composition of different synagogues? (“The metropolitan synagogue of the Prince of the Captivity is ornamented with pillars of richly colored marble, plated with gold and silver; on the pillars are inscribed verses of the psalms in letters of gold.” 104-5)
    - Because he wanted to create a record of the physical manifestations of Jewish presences and to provide a point of comparison for future generations to understand how the buildings have changed since his own lifetime.
  + Why does he put into biblical context some of the places he visited? (“To Babylon one day; this is the ancient Babel and now lies in ruins but the streets still extend thirty miles.” 106; Sepulcher of Jesus, 105)
    - To demonstrate inherent connections between the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity in the liturgical figures that have shaped the messages of each.
  + Why do you think it was so important to Rabbi Benjamin that he recount to his readers the kindness of Muslim and Christian rulers to Jews? I.e. Abbasid leader, 94
    - To provide for readers a fuller view of how such rulers actually interacted with Jewish peoples so as not to allow readers to think that one policy at one time should define entire interreligious relationships during a longer time period.

Part III – Evaluation

* The geography section of the evaluation extends the teachable moment of studying Rabbi Benjamin’s story to other fields that can be easily neglected when the Middle Ages are taught. The particular purpose of mapping out the structure of Rabbi Benjamin’s journey is to give students a visual representation that clearly portrays the span of this journey, a fact that is especially remarkable when viewed in light of the many Jewish communities throughout. Students are therefore challenged to consider Jewish histories in the Middle Ages not solely socially, but geographically, as well.
* Project map (b) (found below) with marked but unlabeled points of the Indian Ocean area onto the whiteboard. Explain to students that the marked areas are those to where Rabbi Benjamin traveled. Hand each student a copy of this same map.
* Write the names of the cities and countries found in the bullet point list lower on this page onto the board in a list, not labeling where each point is on the projected map. Give each student a pencil. Ask that students write down on their maps which points they think are which cities or countries.
  + Note: Persia is marked as Iran on map (a).
  + Note: The Southern Italian Peninsula, the Eastern Mediterranean coast, and the Tigris River are not marked because they are general areas and not cities or countries.
* Give students a chance to raise their hands to identify each point on the map as the teacher points to each marked area one at a time.
  + If the teacher thinks the class needs a warm up in order to start thinking about what countries and cities are in the area, the teacher can begin by projecting this quiz onto the board and completing it with the students. Have students raise their hands to say which countries they think belong on the list. If necessary, point to a globe or a world map in the classroom to indicate generally where the Indian Ocean is (though do so without showing students any country’s name). The current link is below and the quiz itself can be found on the Sporcle website. The quiz is called “Can you name the countries bordering Indian Ocean and its associated Seas?”
    - <https://www.sporcle.com/games/Markovic/Countries_bordering_Indian_Ocean>
* Once all points on the map have been identified, the teacher should draw, with a dry erase marker onto the projected map, lines with arrows indicating the directions of Rabbi Benjamin’s trip. At this point in the lesson, many students have likely already reviewed this information on the website’s description of Rabbi Benjamin, but this visual should help students to understand the reach of his travels. The relevant places and order of visits are below.
  + Spain to France
  + France (by boat) to Genoa, Pisa, and Rome
  + Rome to the Southern Italian peninsula
  + Greece to Constantinople
  + Israel down to the eastern Mediterranean coast
  + Eastern Mediterranean coast to Jerusalem
  + Damascus to Baghdad
  + Baghdad down the Tigris River to Basra
  + Persia (marked as Iran on map (a)) to India
  + India to China
  + Cairo and Alexandria (both had thriving Jewish communities)
  + Sicily and then home to Tudela
* Students should sit down with their partners again. Each pair should have its own computer with the IOWH website’s Medieval Era map already pulled up. The teacher will hand out to each pair two copies of the below quiz and ask the students to search the Medieval Era map on the IOWH website and maps of surrounding times to mark their answers to each question.
* Answers below in bold are correct.
* Students should be given 45 minutes to complete this quiz to the best of their ability. Students should explore the IOWH website’s maps, not solely for the Medieval Era, but for other eras, as well, to find the most accurate answer to each question.
* Once 45 minutes have elapsed, the teacher should collect the students’ completed work. After class time, teachers should evaluate the students’ work. Such an evaluation is done addressing students in pairs precisely because not all of these questions can have answers marked ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’ with one-hundred percent certainty. However, the teacher should use the below copy of the quiz as a rough guide for responding to students’ answers.

Note: Not all of these questions can have definitive answers, but most can be reasonably marked right or wrong (in terms of higher likelihood). The purpose of this lesson is not to have students publish a definitive report on Rabbi Benjamin’s journey and the items that marked it, but to have students pay close attention to the website, to learn, and to understand that they, too, can be historians.

1. What are some ideas and/or items that Rabbi Benjamin might have used to navigate during his journey? Check all that apply.
   1. **Longitude and latitude**
   2. **Astrolabe**
   3. **Indian numerals**
   4. **Arabic numerals**
   5. **Magnetic compass**
   6. **Paper**
2. What exactly does an astrolabe do? Bonus: Why was this tool so important to Muslims in particular? **This navigational tool indicates the positions of stars, planets, the sun, and the moon. It can also tell time, determine a mountain’s height or a well’s depth, and determine latitude, whether at sea or on land.** Bonus: **With the help of an astrolabe, Muslims could determine the direction of Mecca. This is the direction which they would face for their prayer five times a day.**
3. Do you think it is possible that Rabbi Benjamin saw farmers in Muslim-ruled Spain growing indigo plants?
   1. **Yes. It is at least possible.**
   2. No, the time frames do not add up.
4. Might Rabbi Benjamin have been familiar with gunpowder by the end of his trip?
   1. Yes, because, before he departed, it was already being used in Spain to fire projectiles.
   2. No, because no region he visited had a need, recreational or defensive, to create such a material.
   3. **Yes, because it is thought that the Han, Song, and Tang dynasties had all developed gunpowder by the conclusion of the eighth century.**
5. What documents existed during Rabbi Benjamin’s travels to help him? Circle all that apply.
   1. **Al Idrisi map of the world**
   2. *The Travels of Ibn Battuta*
   3. **Al Biruni’s *Critical study of what India says, whether accepted by reason or refused***
   4. **Al Aqubi’s *Book of the Countries***
   5. *Mare Liberum* by Hugo Grotius
   6. *Decades of Asia* by Joao de Barros
6. Do you think it is possible that Rabbi Benjamin sailed past the Kadakkarapally Boat?
   1. **Yes, the time frames of the rabbi’s journey and the span of years in which the boat was built overlap.**
   2. No.
7. Might Rabbi Benjamin have brought rice to sustain him on his travels?
   1. Yes
   2. **No**
8. Which foods might Rabbi Benjamin have consumed on his travels outside of Spain? Check all that apply.
   1. **Dates**
   2. **Cinnamon**
   3. **Millet**
   4. Coffee with chocolate
   5. **Pepper**
9. If Rabbi Benjamin saw one of these ships, where might he have been? Check all that apply.



* 1. **India**
  2. Portugal
  3. **Iran**
  4. Italy

1. Imagine you have discovered a chest of Rabbi Benjamin’s treasures from his trips in his home in Tudela, Spain. Which treasure does NOT belong?

a.  b. 

Cobalt dish Dyed block print cotton

1. d.

**Safavid silk textile** Opium poppy

a.

Note: In this map: blue spots mark regions, green x’s mark cities, and purple outlines mark countries.



b.



Date: Name:

Teacher: Class Period:

Quiz: Assessing Rabbi Benjamin’s Journey

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   2. Astrolabe
   3. Indian numerals
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2. What exactly does an astrolabe do? Bonus: Why was this tool so important to Muslims in particular?
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a.  b. 

China, around the 830s. Medieval Era

Cobalt dish. Dyed block print cotton

c.  d. 

Iran, 1501-1722. Opium poppy

Safavid silk textile.

Safavid courtiers leading Georgian captives.

Other resources:

* <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/medieval-jewish-history-632-to-1650/>
* <http://www2.kenyon.edu/projects/margin/jew.htm>
* <http://www.aitzhayim.org/jewish-life-in-medieval-europe/>
* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AOvX2czeFeI>