



# Very Superstitious

## Topic

Jewish Superstitions

## Grade Level(s)

2<sup>nd</sup> and Up

## Goals for the Lesson/Activity

### Students will:

- Recognize that some superstitious behaviors that they practice might have their origins in Jewish folklore
- Identify superstitious family traditions or behaviors that have been passed down through the generations
- Analyze how Jewish superstitious practices have evolved over time

## Materials needed

- Jewish Superstitions checklist (download) – one for each student or one for each member of each student's family

## Technology needed

- A graphing tool like [Google Sheets](#) or [Online Charts](#)

## Background for Teachers

"One should not believe in superstitions, but still it is best to be heedful of them." ~ Sefer Hasidim

[from www.m-w.com]

### Superstition

1. *a* : a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation  
  
*b* : an irrational abject attitude of mind toward the [supernatural](#), nature, or God resulting from superstition
2. a notion maintained despite evidence to the contrary

[from en.wiktionary.org]

### Bubbe-meise

#### Etymology

Borrowing from Yiddish באבע־מעישע (*bobe-mayse*).

bubbe-meise (*plural* bubbe-meises)

1. (Jewish, literally) A grandmother's fable. Although very close to the idea of an old wives' tale, bubbe-meise is a shade more serious.

#### See also

- old wives' tale



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Jewish superstitions have been around for millennia. As far back as the Torah, *B'nei Yisrael* (the Israelites) were warned not to believe in magic (e.g. Leviticus 19:31). The Talmud is rife with descriptions of demons and how to avoid them (e.g. Tractate Pesachim 109b-112a). Over the years, a distinct subset of superstitions developed called *Bubbe-meises*. These superstitions are the Jewish equivalent of the old-wives'-tale. While many do not truly believe in these *Bubbe-meises*, many are still cautious of them and are careful to follow them... just in case.

A story is even told about Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik, the founder of the Brisker movement, which uses a highly analytical approach to Talmud study:

One time Rav Chaim Soloveitchik paid a visit to his elderly cousin. When he walked in to the house a button fell off his coat. His cousin quickly took out some thread and she sewed the button back on while Rav Chaim was wearing the coat, which is said to make someone forget his Torah. Rav Chaim then employed the known antidote and took the edge of the collar and put it in his mouth.

Puzzled, Rav Chaim's cousin said to him, do you really believe in these Bubba Meises? Rav Chaim answered that when it comes to anything to do with forgetting Torah he doesn't play around and he even takes Bubba Meises very seriously. [Retrieved from [www.revach.net](http://www.revach.net)]

### **Description of Activities**

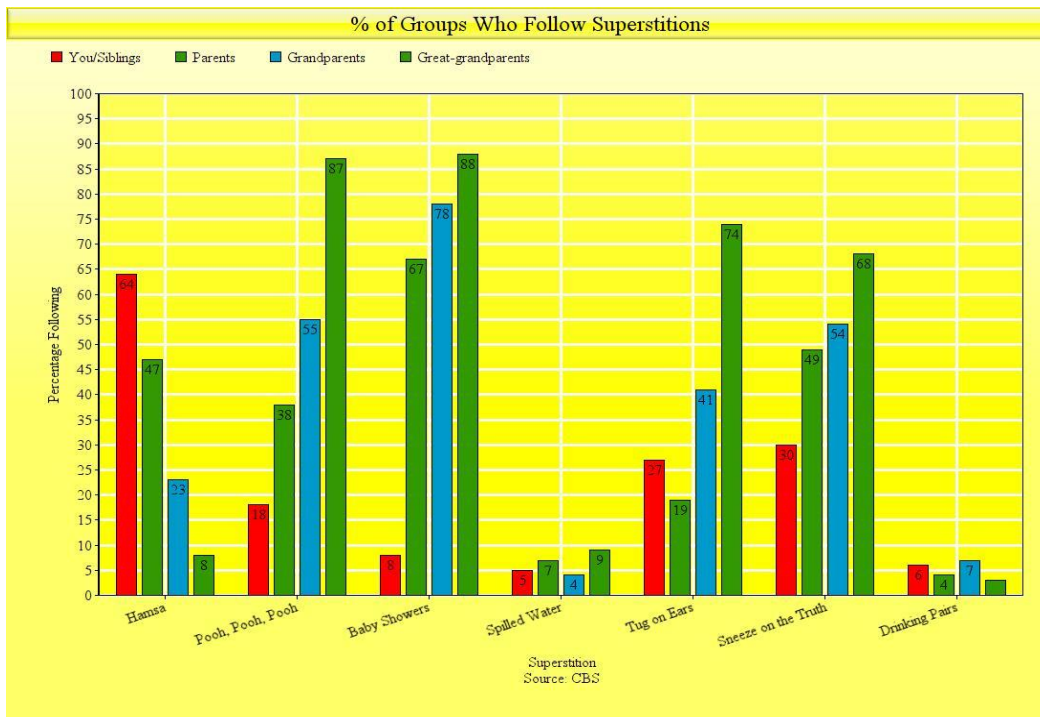
1. Ask students to call out any superstitions they believe in or take heed of, such as: not walking under a ladder, 7 years' bad luck if you break a mirror, don't let a black cat cross your path, etc. If they don't mention it, you might also add things that they do to get a desired result, such as wearing pajamas inside out in hopes of waking up to a snow day or insisting on wearing "lucky" socks to help their chances of winning a game.
2. Tell the story of Rav Chaim Soloveitchik. Ask students for their reactions to Rav Chaim's story.
3. Explain that there is a long tradition of Jewish superstitions and *bubbe meises* (see Background for Teachers for more information).
4. Hand out the Superstitions Checklist. Ask if any of the superstitions on the list sound familiar. You may choose to engage in a few minutes of discussion surrounding the items on the list. Questions might include: Why do you think



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people engage in superstitious activity? Which of these seems the most outlandish?

5. Have students take home the Checklist and survey their families. Be sure to set a date for students to return to class with their completed charts. To make this easier, or more attainable, you might limit the responses to one peer, one parent, and one grandparent or other elder. You might also have them complete this at your synagogue, asking the questions of a group of adults such as a men's or women's group, or regular Torah study class.
6. When students return, break them into small groups and have them compile their results into a graph or a chart. You might also choose to do this as a class. If percentages are too difficult, simply count the number of respondents. A sample graph might look like this one:



7. Discuss the trends illustrated by their graphs. Ask students what they think the graph/chart demonstrates about superstitions and how people's relationship to them can change over time. What conclusions can they draw from this "research"?



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## **Differentiation Options**

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

### **For learners who need more assistance**

- The teacher or *madrach/a* compiles the data and then students discuss the findings.
- The students draw or act out superstitions to get a better understanding of what they might look like.

### ***For learners who need extension opportunities***

- Students research other Jewish superstitions, conduct their own surveys, and present their results.