Discover the HiStory Behind Jewish Last Names

Topic
History, Challenge and Response

Grade Level(s)
5th – 8th

Big Ideas
Jewish family names tell both a story and a history.

Learning Targets
Students will:

1. Examine how Jewish family names evolved from biblical times to today
2. Analyze how different categories of Jewish family names—such as names based on ancestry, profession, location, or personal traits—tell stories of migration and adaptation, persecution and resilience, and belonging and renewal across different places and periods
3. Design an original family name using imagination and historical reasoning drawing from: Hebrew names, parents' professions or roles, special family events, and geographic location. This activity will help learners connect creativity, culture, and history

Relevant Vocabulary

שֵׁם פְּרָטי *(Shem Prati)*	First Name
שֵׁם מִשְׁפָּחָה *(Shem Mishpachah)*	Family Name (Last Name)
חַבְרוּתָא/חַבְרוּתוֹת *(Havruta/Havrutot)*	Learning in pairs (one pair and multiple pairs)
סֵפֶר שׁוֹפְטִים *(Sefer Shoftim)*	The Book of Judges
סֵפֶר מְלָכִים *(Sefer Melachim)*	The Book of Kings

Materials / Technology Needed

- Construction paper (different colors), glue sticks, a writing utensil, scissors
- Colored sticky notes (each *havruta* should get a different color set of sticky notes)
- Black Markers
- Google Slides **OR** use the appendixes:
- **Appendix I** - Names and Pictures (pages 9-10); **Appendix II** - Categories (pages 11-17); **Appendix III** - Jewish Family Names Detective Challenge - (page 18); **Appendix IV** - Clues and Examples (page 19-20); **Appendix V** - Last Name Detective Award (page 21); **Appendix VI** - Last Name Detective of the Year Medal (page 22)

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Background for Teachers

PRE-BIBLICAL AND BIBLICAL NAMING CONVENTIONS

In ancient times and biblical times (before 1000 BCE) the Jewish people—known then as Hebrews or *B'nei Yisrael*—did not have last names as we do today. People were identified by **patronymic** (שֵׁם פְּרָטִי - first name + father's name or male ancestors), using prefixes such as ***Ben*** (for sons) as in [David ben Yishai](link)(David, son of Jesse) and ***Bat*** (for daughters) as in [Serah bat (daughter of) Asher.](link) In later Biblical books such as *Shoftim* and *Melachim*, some names showed where a person came from, as in [Elijah the Tishbite](link), an inhabitant of *Gil'ad.* These early naming traditions helped preserve family connections, tribal identities, and personal stories that later became part of Jewish hiStory—a blend of both history and story.

THE MIDDLE AGES

As Jewish communities spread across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East during the Middle Ages, Jews started to use nicknames or local family names for trade and travel. These included **descriptive** nicknames (given for appearances) as in Shmuel ***Hakatan*** (Samuel the Small One), **toponymics** (place-names) as in Joseph **Toledano** (from Toledo, Spain), **occupational** family names as in Efraim **Safra** (the scribe), and **biblical or lineage** names as in ***Ibn*** Ezra (the son of Ezra). However, these early names did not yet function like modern family names that are passed down from parent to child. They were personal identifiers linked to one individual rather than inherited by future generations—except in special cases, such as the royal line known as the House of David or the priestly family, the House of Aaron.

THE MOVE TO MODERN NAMING CONVENTIONS

In the 10th and 11th centuries, as people moved from small villages to larger cities—especially bustling port cities along the Italian coast—Jews began adopting family names, which were essential for identification in urban centers and trade hubs. The use of family names became more common also for Jews in Spain and Portugal, who adopted the practice from the local Arab communities.

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Among Ashkenazi Jews in Northern Europe, family naming developed differently. Because they lived in smaller, more isolated communities, Ashkenazi Jews often still used patronymic, occupational, or place-based (toponymic) names. First names were still the main way people identified themselves—when someone moved to a new town, they often changed the part of their name showing where they lived but kept their original first name. This lack of fixed family name caused confusion for governments. In 1787 Emperor Joseph II ordered the Jews of Galicia to adopt a permanent *shem mishpachah*. Similar edicts were issued in Frankfort in 1807, in France in 1908 (by Napoleon), in Prussia in 1912, in Bavaria in 1913, in Saxony in 1834, and in Russia in 1935.

TYPES OF NAMES

Names such as Schneider (tailor), Weiss (white), and Cohen (priest) became common. Others adopted **toponymic** family names as in Berliner (from Berlin), Ashkenazi (from Germany). **Descriptive** and **ornamental** names became popular as well: Klein (small), Rosen (rose), Goldstein (gold stone), Silberman (silver man). Some families adopted **occupational** names denoting a particular job or an ancestral profession. Many continued to use **biblical** or **tribal lineage** names like Levi, Ben-David, or Sofer, preserving their connection to ancient Hebrew heritage. Yet, others used **patronymic family** names using the German suffix *sohn* as in the family name Mendelsohn—son of a person named Mendel—or the Slavic suffix *vitch* or *ov* as in Mendelovitch and Mendelov respectively. The new naming laws mainly served government needs—making it easier to collect taxes and draft soldiers. In modern times—especially after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948—many Jews Hebraized their surnames to reflect renewal and to symbolize a break from the diaspora past and to align with the new Israeli national identity. For example, Shertok became Sharett; and Grün became Ben-Gurion. In America, Jews anglicized their names to reflect adaptation and survival. Each of these family names carries both a story and a piece of history. Together, they tell the larger Jewish hiStory— a story of migration and adaptation, persecution and resilience, belonging and renewal.

Note that this activity is not meant to be a genealogical study of Jewish family names but rather an exploration of how family names reflect the experiences, journeys, and identities of the Jewish people across time and place.

Trigger

Teachers can present the background information by breaking it into smaller sections, enlarging each piece, and posting each section on the classroom's walls in chronological

order. To avoid crowding, the teacher can make 2 or 3 copies of the sections and post them on the walls. Learners can then walk around the classroom, read each section, and explore the information independently.

Description of Activities

1. Learners will begin with an incomplete issue and they will share what they notice, wonder, and predict. As new clues are gradually revealed, they will revise their thinking and connect new information to prior ideas. Step by step, they will build a full hiStory (blend of history and story) and conclude by summarizing their understanding through a competitive game and a creative individual activity. On the last game, learners will work in *havrutot* and then share their insights in a larger group. Be sure to remind learners about the guidelines for sharing and speaking with others.

   a. Listen actively.
   b. Interact with each other respectfully.
   c. Refrain from using bad language.
   d. Model empathy and politeness.
   e. Ask clarification questions such as "What makes you say that?" and "Why do you think so?"

2. **Matching Game** (use the names and pictures in **Appendix I**): Give each learner a set of five names. Present one picture at a time so learners can match the five names to their respective pictures in the following way. Explain the first picture and what it represents. Learners look at their five names and choose the one they think best matches that picture. Ask a few learners to share why they chose that name. Then explain the second picture, and learners pick a different name from their remaining cards. Continue this for all five pictures. At the end, have a short discussion about the choices learners made and what helped them match the names to the pictures. Allow 7-10 minutes to work on the task (or adjust the time based on your learners' needs).

   a. **Answers:**

      1. The picture of Moses in the basket is from biblical times. It matches with the name Moshe. He was known as Moshe ben Amram.

2. This picture is a statue of Rambam located in Tiberias Square (also called Maimonides Square) in Córdoba's Jewish Quarter. This corresponds to Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, known as the Rambam, Moses the son of Maimon. The name Rambam is an **acronym** (an abbreviation formed from initial letters) of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon.

3. The picture of the map of Eastern Europe matches with the name Moskowitz. Moskowitz is a derivative of Moses, from a Germanized form of the Yiddish name Moshke.

4. The picture of the Statue of Liberty and the American Immigrant Wall of Honor, located on Ellis Island, a place where so many Jewish people passed through when immigrating from Europe and other places since the 1800s corresponds to the name Mosses. Mosses is a variant of the name Moses and it has been adapted by Jews particularly in the United States. The surname denotes an anglicization of foreign forms like Mozes, Moise, and Moshe.

5. The picture of the portrait is Moshe Sharett, a former Israeli prime minister. It also shows the "flag raising" at the UN in 1949, when Israel's flag was raised at the United Nations. The picture corresponds to Moshe Sharett, Israel's second Prime Minister, born Moshe Shertok in Ukraine. He Hebraized his surname to Sharett after Israel's independence in 1948. Sharett is related to the verb לְשָׁרֵת—to serve—as one who serves, which fits with Moshe Sharett's life as a public servant and statesman.

3. **Discussion prompts for the Matching Game:** "What do you notice about the names—Moshe, Rambam (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon), Moskowitz, Mosses, and Moshe Sharett?" How are they similar or different in the way they sound, look, or tell something about the person? Guide students to notice patterns—Hebrew vs. European forms, patronymic ("ben Maimon") vs. modern surnames, and language shifts. What do these names tell us about the time and place each person lived in? Which might come from ancient or medieval Jewish life? Which sound like names from later historical periods? Why do you think those changes happened?

4. Ask learners if they have ever wondered why people have the last names they do? Last names can tell us stories about our families, where they came from, and what they did long ago (use **Appendix II** - Categories). Tell them that they are going to learn about some of the main categories of Jewish last names. For each type, they will see a picture and an example of a family name. Give a short explanation for each one so it's easy to understand. If learners want, they can share an example from their own family. But if they don't have one to share, that's perfectly fine.

5. Present the list of names in **Appendix III**. Look at the list of family names provided and analyze the list. Get ready to play a **Jewish Family Names Detective Challenge**.   **Objective:** Classify Jewish family names correctly and explain your reasoning.

   a. **Instructions:** In *hevrutot,* analyze the family names provided and ask yourselves:

   1. **Questions**:

      a. Does this name sound like a place?

      b. Does it suggest a job, a trait, or a Hebrew word?

      c. Could it have been created to sound beautiful (like a flower or gem)?

      d. Was it assigned, chosen, or changed by law?

   2. **Classify** the family names and decide which category each name belongs to. Write each name on a sticky note. Names can fit more than one category; therefore make multiple sticky notes if necessary. If you need help figuring out the meaning of a family name, check the list on **Appendix IV** for clues and examples.

   3. **Scoring**: **2 points** for a correct category; **1 point** if the name could fit multiple categories and you explain your reasoning; **Bonus 1 point** for creative or historically informed explanations. **Time Limit: 15 minutes** to classify all names (or adjust the time based on your students' needs).

4. **Reveal & Discuss: Review answers** as a class. Each team explains their reasoning. **Possible Questions:** Did others place some names differently? What clues helped you decide? **Award points**. **Winners:** Name Detective Awards **(Appendix V)** will be given to everyone who attains a score of 7 or more. **Winning Team:** A printable medal **(Appendix VI)** will be given to the team that gets the most points.

5. **Reflection—**Possible guiding questions include:

   a. Which type of name (place-based, family-based, occupation-based, etc.) feels most meaningful to you? Why?

   b. Share one insight about what names can tell us about history.

   c. What do these names tell us about where Jewish families lived and what they experienced?

   d. How can a family name show migration or adaptation to new places and languages?

   e. Some names were chosen, others were forced. What does that reveal about power, survival, and resilience?

   f. Why might Jews in modern Israel or elsewhere return to Hebrew names?

   g. How can a name express belonging, identity, and renewal?

   h. Which category does your family name belong to? How do you spell your family name? Are there alternate spellings to your family name? How might the different spellings reflect different family journeys?

6. Learners tell their own family hiStory by coming up with an additional name for their family. Learners create a slide that displays the additional name and explains through images and/or words how that name tells their family hiStory. The slide should also demonstrate which category the name fits in.

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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

- Make a paper mosaic or paper mosaic of your family name(s). Trace the family name as the design.
- Design a poster using the two-in-one word hiStory—history begins with our story.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Create a new family name category.
- Make up a story about a Jewish family. Imagine that their name might have changed through time - from ancient, to medieval to modern times.
- Design a short video explaining and reflecting on the two-in-one word hiStory, namely "Where Story Meets History."
- Create a flashcard for each *shem mishpachah* of your class and classify them according to the different categories (Patronymic, toponymic, occupational, descriptive, ornamental, Biblical/Hebraic/Tribal Lineage, adopted/forced).

Resources

Benzion C. Kaganoff, "Jewish Surnames Through the Ages: An Etymological History," *Commentary Magazine*, September 1956

Center for Jewish History - Genealogy Institute

Arthur Kurzweil, *From Generation to Generation: How to Trace Your Jewish Genealogy and Family History*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

Appendix I

Names

1) Moshe

2) Rabbi Moses ben Maimon – Rambam

3) Moskowitz

4) Mosses

5) Moshe Sharett

Pictures
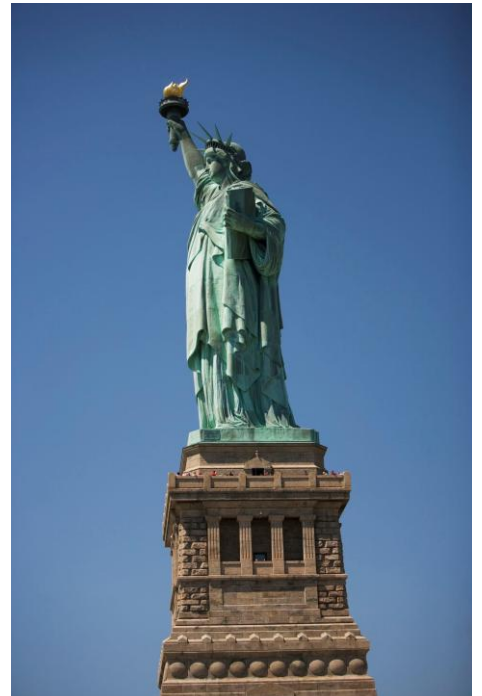
Appendix II - Categories

Patronymic - (from father/ancestor) - *Shem Mishpachah* - Ben David

Toponymic - (from a place) - Toledo - *Shem Mishpachah* **- Toledano**

Occupational - (from a job) - *Shem Mishpachah* - Schneider -

tailor in German and Yiddish

Descriptive - (from a personal trait) - *Shem Mishpachah* **- Kurtz - short in German and Yiddish**

Ornamental - (beautiful gem, flower or object) - *Shem Mishpachah* - Rosenberg - rose mountain in German

Biblical/Hebraic/Tribal Lineage - (connect to the Bible, Hebrew words, or ancient tribes of Israel) -

Shem Mishpachah - Cohen

Adopted/Forced - (Beginning in the 18th century, Jews in Eastern Europe, had to adopt family names - they could be chosen or bought, others were assigned by officials) - *Shem Mishpacha*h Schwartz - black-haired in German and Yiddish (given at times by officials), Edelstein - precious stone (adopted by choice).

Appendix III - Jewish Family Names Detective Challenge

1. Cohen

2. Levi

3. Ben-David

4. Schneider

5. Weiss

6. Klein

7. Rosen

8. Goldstein

9. Toledano

10. Berliner

11. Shertok / Sharett

12. Gruen / Ben-Gurion

13. Dayan

14. Barak

Appendix IV - Clues and Examples

Shem Mishpacha	Meaning
Ben-Artzi	son of my land
Salz	salt
Garfinkel	carbuncle
Ben Gurion	former Grün or Gruen
Abramsohn	son of Abram
Goldberg	gold mountain
Edelstein	precious stone
Kantor	Hazzan
Schatz	*sheliach tzibbur* - representative of the congregation
Gold	former Goldstein or Goldschmidt
Weiss	White
Kurtz	Short
Barak	biblical name meaning "lightning"
Al-Fassi	a person from Fez in Morocco
Schneider	tailor
Dayan	judge or "religious" judge
Silberman	silver man
Rosenberg	rose mountain
Blum	flower
Steinberg	mountain
Einstein	one stone
Levy - Levin, Levinsky, Levitt, or Levitansky	temple singer
Kohen, Cohen, Khan, Katz, Kagan, or Kaplan	priest
Berliner	a person from Berlin

Shem Mishpacha	Meaning
Applebaum	apple tree
Moss	former Moskowitz
Klein	Small
Bernstein	amber
Yerushalmi	a person from Jerusalem
Abramovitch - ovich (or -owicz, -ovitch)	A Slavic suffix meaning "son of" or "descendant of Abraham"
Melamed	teacher
Sofer	scribe
Spiro (or Shapiro)	a person from Speyer (a city in Germay)
Finch	former Finkelstein
Sharett	former Shertok
Breuer	brewer
Farber	painter
Schmalz	grease
Green	former Greenberg
Goldsmith	jeweler
Leder	leatherworker
Schechter	ritual slaughterer
Schwartz	black-haired
Gross	big
Benezra	son of "salvation"
Almogabi	one from Mogador" (Essaouira, Morocco)

Appendix V - Last Name Detective Award

LAST NAME DETECTIVE AWARD

This certificate is proudly presented to

_____

For outstanding skills in discovering, exploring, and understanding stories behind last names

Your curiosity, attention to detail, and detective work make you a true Last Name Detective

Date: _____

Appendix VI - Last Name Detective of the Year Medal