

Primary Sources as a Portal to Jewish Peoplehood

OVERVIEW

In this day and digital age, being an educator is no easy task. Getting students' attention and then maintaining their engagement through a deep, complex learning process is challenging. In the realm of Jewish education, there are additional hurdles: Jewish literacy is in decline, learners are not always familiar with the richness and diversity of Jewish life, and some may view Jewish culture as irrelevant to their personal identity. How can learning with primary sources serve as a remedy – or offer a portal into the treasure trove of Jewish Peoplehood? This pedagogy proposes that authentic primary sources, approached through the PaRDeS framework, are uniquely suited to create deep encounters with Jewish Peoplehood, cultivate a sense of layered belonging, and promote learner agency.

PaRDeS – an acronym from the Hebrew words *P'shat*, *Remez*, *Drash*, and *Sod* (also the Hebrew word for “orchard” or “garden”) – is originally a framework for interpreting Torah through four levels of meaning. Applied here to primary sources of all kinds, it becomes a structured journey from first encounter to personal relevance to Peoplehood connection – and ultimately to creative contribution. The learner does not merely study the past. They enter it, find themselves within it, and add their own voice to the ongoing Jewish story.

PEOPLEHOOD AS A MAP, LEARNING AS A JOURNEY

Imagine Jewish Peoplehood as a multilayered map: a foundation of history, culture, and geography on which generations of ideas, texts, and practices are built. Studying Peoplehood is a multifaceted journey that allows us to learn about our past, the individuals who shaped our collective story, the communities from which we emerge, and ultimately ourselves. As educators, our role is to help learners explore this vast map and find entry points that speak to them. Each learner arrives with a particular time, place, and experience of Jewish life, yet primary sources allow them to encounter other voices – past and present – and discover new pathways within the landscape of Jewish Peoplehood.

The Mishnah (Pesachim 10:5) instructs that in every generation a person must view themselves as though they personally left Egypt. This is more than an invitation to bring history to life – it is a demand to take an active part in our shared story, to bring your life into history. It is the mindset this pedagogy seeks to cultivate: moving learners from spectators to

participants, and eventually to stakeholders who take ownership of and responsibility for the continuous building of Jewish Peoplehood. The Passover Haggadah – a primary source in most Jewish homes, available in thousands of editions across centuries and continents – is itself the perfect illustration of this process: a story handed down through the generations, with each community and each generation adding their own unique piece.

The journey does not end with study. Once learners experience the “magic” of uncovering layered meaning in a primary source, they are often moved to contribute a new point on the map – shifting from spectators to participants. This may be as simple as documenting a piece of their own Jewish experience or sharing a contemporary source from their lives that tells their story. In each case, they extend the story of Jewish Peoplehood by adding their voice.

THE POWER OF AUTHENTIC ENCOUNTER: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

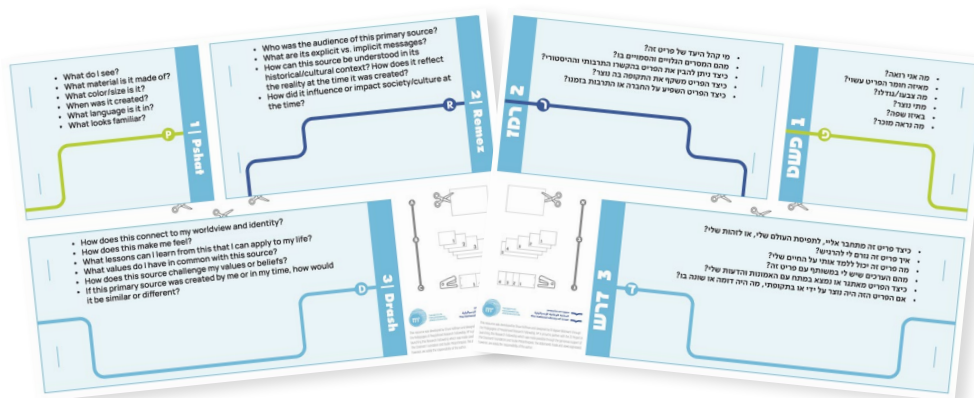
Primary sources, as used in this pedagogy, are original, tangible, authentic documents – manuscripts, letters, photographs, posters, newspapers – rather than ritual objects or Judaica. The digital age has made Jewish texts more accessible than ever: millions of learners can now find and read vast stretches of Jewish literature with a basic internet search. And yet something is lost. A manuscript uploaded to a digital platform loses its color, texture, smell, and handwriting. A five-hundred-year-old illuminated Haggadah with wine stains offers an entirely different experience from reading the same texts in a freshly printed edition. Seeing a handwritten draft of a Chana Senesh poem with crossed-out words and spelling mistakes does not compare to reading the polished final text on a website. A personal letter between Alfred Dreyfus and his wife Lucie transforms a famous trial into a human story. Physical encounter with authentic sources creates the kind of emotional connection and empathy that deepens a learner’s sense of belonging to the Jewish people across time and space.

Research on primary source pedagogy largely emerges from history education and highlights a productive tension between open-ended inquiry and structured teacher guidance. Inquiry-based approaches, such as those used by the Library of Congress through tools like Observe–Reflect–Question, center student curiosity, with teachers acting as guides. Sam Wineburg’s historical thinking model trains students to evaluate sources like historians – considering authorship, purpose, and context – which is especially important in the digital age. Empathy-based education, as articulated by Barton and Levstik in *Teaching History for the Common Good*, emphasizes ethical and emotional engagement with the past. What most of this research overlooks, and what is essential in Jewish education, is the role of identity: Jewish learning depends on ownership, interpretation, and creative engagement, echoing the midrashic tradition. The PaRDeS framework integrates all of these dimensions – inquiry, historical thinking, empathy, and identity – into a single coherent journey.

THE PEDAGOGY OF PEOPLEHOOD

The PaRDeS practice can take place wherever learners encounter primary sources – in a classroom, a museum, a community program, or independently. Sources should ideally be printed in color and at an appropriate size to enable the most authentic encounter possible. The practice unfolds in four stages. P'shat (the plain meaning) invites learners to observe the primary source itself – its physical features, language, and first impressions – grounding them in what is actually there before interpretation begins. Remez (hint or context) asks learners to dig deeper into the source's context: who created it, for whom, under what circumstances, and what explicit and implicit messages it carries. These first two stages, anchored in the past, typically take 10–20 minutes. Drash (interpretation) turns the focus to the learner: how does this source connect to my worldview and identity? What values do I share with it, or where does it challenge me? This stage invites creative responses – a journal entry, a drawing, a short video – anchored in the comparison between the source and the learner's own life. Sod (deeper significance) moves beyond the source and the individual learner to ask what this artifact reveals about Jewish Peoplehood across time and space: how does it connect to other expressions of Jewish life? What might it mean to a learner a hundred years from now? These final two stages, anchored in the present and future, require substantial time – ideally 30–45 minutes or more – and can extend across multiple sessions.

A fifth element completes the journey: learners are invited to add their own piece – to articulate, in writing or drawing, what they see as the next step on their personal Peoplehood journey. This might be a topic for further exploration, an artistic response, or a creative work inspired by what they have encountered. In selecting primary sources, facilitators are guided by five principles: multi-sensory richness (visual and audio sources deepen engagement and memory); same but different (balancing familiarity with novelty); choice and voice (personal resonance across the multitude of Jewish expressions); creativity and interpretation (learners who feel their interpretation matters will contribute more deeply); and engagement with conflict and complexity (including perspectives that challenge assumptions, not only those that confirm them). The PaRDeS Roadmap resource, available via the QR code below, guides learners and facilitators through each stage with structured questions and prompts.



CONCLUSION

Learning with authentic primary sources is a uniquely powerful way to engage learners with the vast and vibrant map of Jewish Peoplehood. The primary source serves as a portal into a specific point in time and space, through which the learner catches a glimpse of an alternative experience of Jewish life – one that is both foreign and familiar. The PaRDeS framework guides learners through that encounter step by step, from careful observation to personal connection to Peoplehood significance to creative contribution. This process aims to move learners from spectators to active participants who add their own voice and interpretation to the ongoing Jewish story. Jewish Peoplehood is a multilayered journey, and critical thinking is not the destination – it is the foundation for creative expression, belonging, and agency.



To access the full PaRDeS Roadmap, source selection guidance, and activity resources, scan the QR code or [click here](#).



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