

Empathizing (Judaism)

Classroom Guests and Site Trips

Communities of any size are likely to have a Jewish synagogue, temple, or congregation. They typically welcome visitors and are well prepared to explain what the students will see there. Most welcome students at Shabbat services as well. The students' experience will be enhanced if they have a basic understanding of Jewish worship beforehand. Be sure to advise the students about proper dress if you will visit an Orthodox congregation.

There are Holocaust memorials in many communities that have a significant Jewish population, and the students can visit there as well. Be prepared to help the students deal with the strong emotions they may experience.

If a site visit is not possible, it may be possible to find a Jewish guest speaker to come in and speak with your class. Student rabbis can be especially engaging and typically relate well to teens. A guest speaker who can bring items for "show and tell," such as a Seder plate, shofar, or menorah, is likely to be well-received.

Cultural or Nonobservant Christians?

Judaism's emphasis on the group, and on group identity, leads to the possibility of people being "cultural Jews"—people who consider themselves Jewish but who are not religiously observant. Most Jews are quite willing to include such nonobservant Jews in the Jewish community. Ask the students to reflect on whether they think there are "cultural Christians" in the United States, and if so, what that might mean. Is this an acceptable position from a Christian standpoint?

Maimonides' Principles and the Nicene Creed

Maimonides' Principles are a concise summary of central beliefs for Jews; the Nicene Creed serves a similar function for many Christians. The students can gain a clearer understanding of the similarities between these two great religious traditions by comparing these two documents, noting similarities and points of divergence.

In the Minority

Ask the students to think about whether they have ever been in a situation in which they have been a cultural minority. How did that feel? Were they outwardly harassed, or was their discomfort mainly internal? Perhaps some have traveled abroad and been where they weren't familiar with the language. Others may be willing to share experiences of cultural difference in some other setting. Ask the students if they are aware of prejudice, anti-Semitism, or harassment in their community that is directed at other minority groups. What types of responses might they make?

