

Update – Jewish Heritage Committee May 2024

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SLIDE 2 – JEWISH HERITAGE MONTH

In 2018, Parliament unanimously passed a bill proclaiming, that throughout Canada, the month of May will be marked as “Canadian Jewish Heritage Month,” celebrating the inspirational role that Jewish Canadians have played and continue to play in communities across the country. This important initiative celebrates the contributions Jewish Canadians have been making to this country for 250 years, from law, to politics, to culture, to sports.

The first Jews arrived in what would become Canada in 1760 as members of a British regiment. They settled in Trois Rivieres, Quebec. The Jewish population remained tiny until over a century later, when we start to see significant waves of Jewish immigration to Canada and North America, towards the end of 19th century and first quarter of the 20th century. During this period, over 2.8M Jews left eastern and southern Europe, fleeing economic and social persecution, and violent attacks known as pogroms that became commonplace in small towns across much of central and Eastern Europe during this period. This was the period my grandparents and many in their extended families left Poland and Russia, who, like many immigrants before and so many after them, came to Canada in search of safety, security and a better life for their families.

SLIDE 3 – WHO ARE WE?

Jews are an ethnic and national group who identify as a distinct group with our own religion, history, traditions, and story. Jews have been extremely effective in sustaining a sense of mutual responsibility toward their people and its members for more than 2,000 years. This comes both from elements within Judaism, but is also born from a history of exclusion, discrimination and persecution, where laws restricting what Jews could do for work were commonplace or where Jews could go, forcing them to rely on their community for economic and social stability and survival. And this was true not just in Europe, where Jews were leaving – this was a reality even in mid 20th century Toronto, where there were quotas restricting Jews in particular professions, and venues such as skating rinks and swimming pools that barred access to Jews). I remember vividly my mother telling me stories of growing up in Toronto and not

being allowed to go swimming in certain places as there were signs that said, "No Jews Allowed". We all have these stories.

Despite the fact that Jews tended to rely on each other and settled in congregated areas, Jews are by no means a monolithic group and Jewish culture and Judaism as a religion varies tremendously. Not all Jews are religious and, those who define themselves as religious have different interpretations of Jewish law that may guide their religious practice. And while many Jews may be non-practicing, or what is often described as "secular", they are still likely to feel part of the Jewish people as the history of the Jewish people also has created a strong cultural tradition that is also celebrated by Jews, including those who would describe themselves as secular.

It is important to remember the Jewish people are very diverse – besides differences in religious practice, we are multiracial, multiethnic and encompass a wide variety of gender identities. They are diverse and add to diversity, something that is often overlooked as Jews are often simply portrayed as white. While Jews have, at times, certainly benefitted from certain privileges associated with whiteness, they also have generally been excluded from DEI conversations, despite their minority status and their significant historical and current traumatic experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and antisemitism, that have in both metaphorical and explicit ways, erasure and elimination.

It is important to note that as of 2023, the world's core Jewish population (those identifying as Jews above all else) was estimated at 15.7 million, which makes up only 0.2% of the total worldwide population. And yet this roughly 15 and a half million Jews is still less than there were in 1939, when the global population of Jewish people worldwide peaked at around 16.6 million. The Holocaust saw Nazi Germany and its collaborators methodically and bureaucratically kill approximately 6 million Jews - in just a few horrifying years... whereby the global population of Jews was reduced by more than a third, a population that has yet to fully recover.

As of 2021, Statistics Canada listed a total of 335,295 Jews living in Canada. This total would account for approximately 1.4% of the Canadian population. Canadian Jews, whether by

culture, ethnicity, or religion, form the fourth largest Jewish community in the world, exceeded only by those in Israel, the United States and France.

Data from the 2021 Canadian census for the city of Toronto (not including all parts of the Greater Toronto Area) shows 74,080 individuals reporting their ethnic or cultural origin as Jewish, and 99,390 reporting it as their religion. In 2021, the enumerated population of Toronto (Census division), was 2,794,356, just shy of 2.8M. Jews make up 3.5% of the Toronto population - which matches the latest TDSB student census, where approximately 3.5% of students self-identified as Jewish.

SLIDE 4 – JEWISH HERITAGE COMMITTEE

The TDSB's Jewish Heritage Committee includes close to 350 staff across every level of the system including Trustees, and is supported by Superintendents Roni Felsen and Debbie Donsky, and our Executive Sponsor Louise Sirisko. Our current Chair is retired principal Corinne Promislow who recently took over from Shari Schwartz-Maltz.

Since its inception in 2015, the JHC activities have always been focused on teaching & learning in classrooms, with students. The committee aims to celebrate Jewish heritage and culture in impactful, innovative, and inspirational ways, with the fight against antisemitism and all forms of hate providing the core goal of this work.

While May is Jewish Heritage Month, the committee has been hard at work all year. Some highlights have included:

SLIDE 5 – BRINGING JEWISH STUDENTS TOGETHER

In December we held a Hanukkah Party that brought together Jewish Student Groups from 16 of our high schools. We believe this is an important network of Jewish student groups at our high schools (many of whom already have Jewish student associations/Jewish culture clubs) who can inspire and support each other.

SLIDE 6 – BRINGING JEWISH STAFF TOGETHER

In December we also provided an opportunity to bring Jewish staff together on the last day of Hanukkah. Based on comments received, staff really appreciated connecting with each other.

SLIDE 7 – INTERNATIONAL HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY

At the end of January, and to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day, the TDSB launched the comprehensive Holocaust education program for Grade 6 students that comprised part of the new social studies curriculum for grade 6 that was instituted this past September by the Ministry of Education, the JHC organized a live-streamed event from the TDSB Boardroom called “To Hope and Back”. As part of this special event, 10,000 copies of a book about the MS St Louis were distributed to grade 6 TDSB students. Then, Shari Schwartz-Maltz interviewed Ana Maria Gordon, the last living survivor of the MS St. Louis in Canada, and Madeline Avedon, daughter of Lisa Avedon, the main character in the book.

SLIDE 8 – CURRICULUM SUPPORTS

This non-fiction book by well-known children’s author Kathy Kacer tells the story of the MS St. Louis, an ocean liner carrying over 900 Jews fleeing Nazi-occupied Europe in 1939 that was turned away from ports in countries where it attempted to land including Cuba, the United States, and Canada. The ship eventually returned to Europe, where several countries eventually took in refugees, but many of them were eventually rounded up and sent to their deaths in roundups by the Nazis. Teachers were given comprehensive lesson plans, and together with the live stream interview event, TDSB students were offered unique and profound learning experiences not only about the Holocaust, but also about compassion, the refugee experience, and so much more. Finally, the author of the book, Kathy Kacer, was kind enough to visit classrooms to discuss her writing process with students, something I was lucky enough to witness. Students came prepared and asked thoughtful questions, not only about the topic before them but also about the creative process of writing that allows for entry into our curriculum in so many different ways.

SLIDE 9 – JEWISH HERITAGE MONTH IN OUR SCHOOLS

As with other TDSB Heritage Months, local schools determine how to acknowledge.

We are grateful to the many schools who housed displays, made announcements, did assemblies and made space for rich discussion about Jewish Heritage and Culture.

SLIDE 10 – YOM HASHOAH

Yom HaShoah or Holocaust Remembrance Day specifically commemorates the six million Jews murdered in the Holocaust, and the heroism of survivors and rescuers.

The TDSB was pleased to once again partner with Liberation 75 to offer a Student Education Day on Yom HaShoah, May 6th, 2024 – incredible programming for students from grades 4-12.

SLIDE 11 – THE MOUSE WHO DANCED THE HORA

Our program for 2024, as in previous years, is part of our committee's commitment to plan annual educational opportunities and enrich the curriculum for further learning about Jewish heritage and culture. Each year we choose one grade or division to focus on and provide programming. In some years, we have been fortunate to work with outside organizations to provide larger scale programs. Because of October 7, we deliberately chose to scale down and centre learning on our youngest students - focussing on students in kindergarten to Grade 3. We are using the book The Mouse Who Danced the Hora by Pamela Mayer, illustrated by Christine Davenier, to teach our youngest students about diversity and equity through Jewish wedding traditions, and learning to dance the Hora.

A huge thank you goes to our JHM subcommittee, led by Corinne Promislow and Stacie Berman, and committee members, Cale Zimmerman, Anthony Cushman, Robin Kornblum, Julie Abrahams, Jacqueline Newstadt, Michelle Munk, Seth Bernstein and David Mandelzys. Special thanks to Robin Kornblum and Julie Abrahams who developed a teacher's guide for the Mouse Who Danced the Hora including lesson plans and curriculum expectations. Also, thanks to teacher Jacqueline Newstadt and Grade 12 Visual Art Student Anamika Hossan, from York Memorial, who designed the image on the poster. Finally, a huge thanks to Principal Lindsay Borden from Allenby Jr PS, who opened her school and has over 40 classes from Kindergarten to Grade 3 participate in the "Mouse Who Danced the Hora" program, which included, learning the Hora dance, making challah in a bag, decorating tzedakah boxes, playing Gaga, and of course dancing the Hora with Allenby students and volunteers. Principal Borden was supported every step of the way by Vice-Principal Nazleah Khan.

SLIDE 12 – DANCING THE HORA

Students from Allenby Jr Public School helped students learn to dance the hora!

SLIDE 13 – MAKING CHALLAH

The braided challah, which is made with eggs, is the Jewish Sabbath and holiday bread. It is surrounded by folklore and tradition and loaded with symbolism. Students mixed all the ingredients in a bag to bring back to their school to bake.

SLIDE 14 – DECORATING TZEDAKAH BOXES

We also offered students the opportunity to decorate Tzedakah boxes. Tzedakah literally means righteousness. To do tzedakah is to live justly. It is often interpreted as charity, because Judaism views giving as the ultimate act of righteousness. Whether it is volunteering, advocating for social justice, or giving money, tzedakah is an integral part of living a Jewish life and is required of all Jews. Please find boxes made by Allenby students for you to use to collect for your favourite cause.

SLIDE 15 – EDUCATING AGAINST HATE

From October to December 2023, Toronto Police Service reported Antisemitic incidents were up 211 per cent compared to the same time period last year. Antisemitism made up 53 per cent of all reported hate crimes during that period.

City Data mirrors TDSB's hate statistics as reported in March where Jewish students make up approximately 3.5% of the population but the proportion of incidents that involved antisemitism from October to December 2023 increased by 5 percentage points from 10 to 15%, as compared to the same period last year – the highest reported hate by creed.

The JHC supports the efforts of our Equity and Human Rights Office in educating against hate.

SLIDE 16 – COMBATTING HATE AND RACISM

The JHC is pleased to be involved in the creation of the Board's Antisemitism Strategy – we believe it is critical to be responsive to the voices of communities by developing tailored action plans each based on the pillars of the Anti-Hate and Anti-Racism Strategy.

And now it is our pleasure to show a short video filmed by Erin Pallet last week at Allenby Jr PS.