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The Center for Justice  
Education at Eastern State  
Presents:

EDUCATOR GUIDE:  
**UNLOCKING HISTORY:  
JUDAISM AT EASTERN  
STATE PENITENTIARY**

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**EASTERN STATE  
PENITENTIARY**

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## **UNLOCKING HISTORY EDUCATOR GUIDE: JUDAISM**

This guide supports a classroom viewing of [“Unlocking History: Judaism at Eastern State Penitentiary”](#) [runtime 5 minutes].

This episode explores how Jewish people incarcerated at Eastern State practiced their faith and the efforts made to preserve the nation's first-ever prison synagogue, offering an in-depth look at the intersection of religion, prison life, and historical preservation. By understanding how Jewish prisoners practiced their faith at Eastern State Penitentiary and the efforts to preserve these spaces today, students will gain insight into the resilience of faith and the importance of maintaining cultural heritage.

### **Grade Levels:**

9th through 12th

### **Number of Class Periods:**

One period

### **Author:**

Designed by the Eastern State Education Team.

## Learning Objectives:

- Understand the specific religious challenges faced by Jewish prisoners at Eastern State Penitentiary.
- Explore the historical significance of the prison's synagogue as the first of its kind.
- Analyze the broader implications of how faith, specifically Judaism, is practiced in prison, both at Eastern State and in prisons today.
- Discuss the role of historic preservation in maintaining sacred spaces and cultural heritage.

## Guided Questions for Viewing:

- Why do you think the construction of a synagogue inside a prison was significant, and what might it have meant to the Jewish prisoners there?
- How does religious freedom impact life in prison?
- What lessons can current prison administrations draw from the treatment of Jewish individuals at Eastern State?
- Why is it important to preserve the synagogue and other sacred spaces within a historic site like Eastern State?

## Activities and Extensions:

### Research Project:

- Assign students to research the history of religious practices within U.S. prisons, focusing on Judaism or other faiths. How do prison systems accommodate religious practices today? What challenges still exist?

### Classroom Discussion:

- Hold a class discussion on the following prompt: "To what extent should prisons accommodate the religious practices of incarcerated individuals? Should these accommodations be standard in all correctional facilities?" Students should consider the balance between security, reform, and the right to religious freedom.

### Reflection Essay:

- Ask students to write a short essay answering one of the following prompts:
  - What does the history of Judaism at Eastern State Penitentiary tell us about faith, resilience, and human dignity in difficult circumstances?
  - How does the preservation of the synagogue at Eastern State Penitentiary contribute to our understanding of religious history in American prisons?

## Common Core Standards:

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2:** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.9:** Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.3:** Analyze in detail a series of events described in a text; determine whether earlier events caused later ones or whether the events were merely coincidental.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3:** Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1:** Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

## QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

Contact [education@easternstate.org](mailto:education@easternstate.org).

Learn more about the Center for Justice Education at Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site, and about the Teacher Institute, at

**EASTERNSTATE.ORG**