

ISRAEL

LESSON 1: INTRODUCTION

What makes a nation a nation? Bet you never really thought about it before but in the long run, that is what this class is all about. We are going to talk about Israel, some of its history and what it means to you. But long before we can talk about that, we must address our question. What makes Americans, American? Or Chinese, Chinese? Well that's easy, you say: Americans live in America and Chinese people live in China. Perhaps, but who gave china to the Chinese or America to the Americans? What binds the Chinese together besides just the borders of the country in which they live?

These are puzzling questions to be sure but irrelevant to you, as a seventh grader in Sharon, MA. Maybe, but these questions will play a major role in our discussion about Israel. So sit back and take a minute to think; for thinking and talking are what this class is about. Our journey will take us to many places and will introduce us to many great people, men and women who shaped history. The trip will be well worth your time and energy.

Now look at a map, any map (or globe). On it you see outlined countries: France, Egypt, Germany, China, Brazil... Did you ever consider how these countries got to be what they are? Of course! Ancient Cro-Magnon inhabitants of Northern Africa woke up one morning and one said to the other: "Harry guess what? We are Egyptians; and where you are standing, it's Egypt!", and if you believe that... So there is nothing that was predetermined that the piece of land around the Nile would be Egypt; nor that the people are called Egyptians. People and nations developed over thousands of years as families joined together to become tribes and tribes to become nations. So, I return to my original question: What things do people share that binds them into a nation?

I will suggest a number of things but perhaps you can think of others. Nations share: 1) common historical beginnings; 2) common language; 3) common cultural and political heritage; and 4) common homeland. So what makes Americans is our language (English), our history (Revolution of 1776 and democratic form of government), our American culture (freedom and tolerance) and our land (America). Now, of course, it is much more complex than that because many immigrants have come to our shores and because the Indians who share none of these common factors were here before any of our ancestors. But that is precisely the point. We conquered the land and declared ourselves Americans and so our country appears on maps as "America". And so, with China, for example, common language (Chinese and its infinite number of dialects), history (Empirical tyrants, defeat of the Huns; and the Great Wall), cultural heritage (unique art of forms, family structure, and rice-centered economy) and homeland (China). And those who originally lived in what is now China (the autochthonous population- there's a big word for you SAT's) gone, disappeared or like the American Indian absorbed into the conquering population. And so it goes with every nation on your real or imagined map. Think about it and try doing the same exercise with other nations. By the way, you may truly believe that the Chinese should give back China to the original inhabitants and America belongs to the Indians and we should leave. While not very practical, I respect that opinion very much. We will talk more about this idea later on.

Good, now you understand. So here is the big question: What about the Jews? Are we a nation? I did not invent this question. It has exercised better minds than mine and yours for centuries. Let's do the test, just as we did for other nations. Language? Hebrew. History? Exodus from Egypt and entry into Land of Canaan. Culture? Torah law, prophetic ideals, Jewish values. Homeland? ISRAEL!! Then how come so many people think we should not be in Israel? Do they think the Chinese should not be in china? Or the French in France? So you see, nothing is simple and in our class time together we are going to try to explore why so many people find Israel's existence difficult to accept. What if anything makes Israel different from other nation states? Is it just because we are Jews? That is what we are here to think about. Buckle up then and prepare for a bumpy ride through our past and into our present. Your ticket is your mind and your willingness to use it! I look forward to the trip!!