**Jewish Decisions to Resist—A Critical Thinking Holocaust Lesson**

**Grade Level:** 8th-12th

**Subject:** Social Studies and English-Language Arts

**Time Required:**

**Introduction:** Jewish responses to the Holocaust are best described as “choiceless choices.” Jews were forced to make judgments and decisions without viable alternatives. Few outcome was likely to be in their favor. Nevertheless, decisions were made.

Students often have difficulty understanding why Jews didn’t “just leave” or “just shoot the Nazis.” This critical thinking lesson is designed to help them understand the dilemmas and decisions faced by Jewish individuals during the Holocaust.

**Preparation: (**These are directions for a typical secondary class of 23-30.)

1. Consider how you will divide students into three topical groups: one for emigration, one for hiding, and one for armed resistance. Within each of these three topical groups, subdivide the students into pairs or triads (a mini-group).
2. Prepare—either in print or digital form—the following materials for each student and mini-group:
   1. The **student notesheet** document included with this lesson is a master copy. Ideally, students will receive a notesheet with their assigned topical group’s information on the second page. The first page—which has been set-up for digital note-taking—should remain the same for all.
   2. Decide how many **documents** about the assigned topic each student will be expected to study and take notes about. The recommendation is that each student study at least two of the documents. Within one mini-group it is hoped that four to six documents have been considered for discussion.
   3. Decide which **Jewish profiles** each mini-group will consider. Within each topical group, there should be a couple students who are assigned each profile. By the way, these profiles are composite characters based on historical information. These are not necessarily profiles of real individuals.
   4. At Step 3B of the process, each mini-group will need a print or digital copy of the “**Timeline of Holocaust Events**” included with this lesson.
3. A summation or reflection activity has not been described as part of this lesson plan. However, a few ideas critical for comprehension of this lesson are listed at Step 6 of the process. You may choose to assess student learning using an informal assessment such as a ticket out of class or journal entry. Or you may wish to create a more formal assessment such as a short essay.

**Process:**

1. Teach a short lesson about Jewish resistance.

1. Pose the question: “How do we make important decisions?” for class discussion. Record the students’ ideas about the factors they take into consideration when making a life-changing decision. Introduce the idea that each individual European Jew during the Holocaust was forced to make decisions that were limited by the circumstances in which they found themselves. Historians have called the decisions Jews made “choiceless choices” because they had no viable options—the outcomes of all the decisions were devastating.
2. Ask students to brainstorm ideas about this question:  
   In the face of Nazi persecution—which eventually escalated to murder—what types of responses (or decisions how to react) were available to Jews?
3. Isolate three possible responses: emigration, hiding, armed resistance. Ask students to offer ideas about what was necessary, within the context of the Holocaust, to accomplish each one.
4. Use the notes from “Jewish Decisions to Resist—Teacher Guide” to teach a short lesson about Jewish resistance and the obstacles that made resistance difficult.
5. This lesson will explore the decisions Jews made in regard to emigration, hiding, and armed resistance.

2. Divide students into three groups: emigration, hiding, armed resistance. For each student within the group, assign:

A. One Jewish profile appropriate for their group.

B. Two or more of the documents listed for their group.

Allow students time (class time or homework) to read/view their assigned documents, consider their assigned profiles, and take notes on the question: “What would it have taken to emigrate/hide/mount an armed resistance during the Holocaust?”

3. Subdivide the three groups into pairs and triads (mini-groups).

A. Ask the mini-groups to discuss their assigned readings, compare notes, and consider this question:

* What was necessary to emigrate/ hide/ resist with arms during the Holocaust?

B. Assign one or two of the profiles to each mini-group and provide each with a copy of the **timeline**. Ask each mini-group to consider:

* When might the person profiled have decided to emigrate/hide/resist with arms during the Holocaust?
* When would those actions have no longer been possible?

C. Tell all students that they must be prepared, when called upon, to share with the class the ideas discussed in their mini-groups.

4. Reconvene the entire class. Call upon students representing each of the three topical groups (emigration, hiding, and armed resistance) and each of the profiles to report on…

* The key observations/ideas of their mini-group members.
* Their mini-group’s answers the questions:
  + What was necessary to emigrate/hide/resist with arms during the Holocaust?
  + When might the person profiled have decided to emigrate/hide/resist with arms during the Holocaust?
  + When would those actions have no longer been possible?
* How their perceptions of the decisions Jews had to make and what was needed to emigrate/ hide/ resist with arms has changed since the start of the lesson.

5. Ask a student representing each Jewish profile to stand and read it for the class. Call upon that student’s mini-group members to report to the class about their discussion of the questions listed above.

Continue this process until all profiles have been explored and all groups have reported on their work.

6. Lead students through a summing-up and reflection process that encompasses the following key points:

* Emigration was available to German and Austrian Jews until 1 Sept 1939 although there were many—often unsurmountable—obstacles. For Jews in other Nazi-occupied territories, emigration was forbidden in Oct 1941.
* Hiding was an option Jews considered after their country was occupied. Hiding in eastern Europe was a very different experience than hiding in western Europe. Hiding required assistance from non-Jews.
* Armed resistance was an option Jews considered after the occupation of their country. It was often a last resort. Generally, Jews risked their lives with armed violence after loved ones had already been murdered by bullets or deported to death camps—making Nazi retaliation via collective responsibility a less powerful deterrent.
* Although Jews survived using all three of these methods—emigration, hiding, and armed resistance—it is important to remember that death was the “normal” experience for two-thirds of Europe’s Jews.

7. Assess student learning—formally or informally—as desired.

**Important Note for Teachers:**  
This lesson is **NOT** a role-playing or simulation exercise. It asks students to analyze and consider the personal and historical circumstances of a European Jew and how those circumstances affect the decision-making process. Students should not become the character described in the profiles or otherwise engage in role-playing as per USHMM guidelines linked below….  
<https://www.ushmm.org/teach/fundamentals/guidelines-for-teaching-the-holocaust>