

Israel's Declaration of Independence Activity Guide

In August 1897, Theodor Herzl organized the First Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland. More than 200 delegates from all over the world brought their varying opinions to this first meeting of what would become the World Zionist Organization (WZO).

Over the next fifty years, the WZO, despite internal differences over how best to accomplish the goals of the movement, achieved diplomatic and practical success in its efforts towards creating a Jewish state in Israel. On May 14, 1948, that dream became a reality, when David Ben-Gurion proclaimed Israel's Independence in Tel-Aviv.



David Ben-Gurion recites Israel's Declaration of Independence in Tel-Aviv on May 14, 1948. Government Press Office of Israel

As late as three weeks before Israel declared independence, no draft of a declaration of independence had yet been written. Initially drafted by attorneys and politicians, the final text reflected the influence of multiple authors and texts including the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution.

On the morning of May 14, following some debate, the National Council voted to declare the creation of Israel. David Ben-Gurion, chairman of the Jewish Agency in Palestine who became Israel's first prime minister, read the Declaration at the Tel Aviv Museum.

The declaration is divided into four parts: a biblical, historical and international legal case for the existence of a Jewish state in the Land of Israel (stanzas 1-7); the self-evident right of the Jewish people to claim statehood (stanzas 8- 10); the actual declaration of statehood (stanza 11); and statements about how the state would operate, including an enumeration of citizen rights (stanzas 12-19).

The full Declaration of Independence is available on the CIE website:

<https://israeled.org/israel-declaration-independence/>

Crafting a Declaration

Following the passage of [UN General Assembly Resolution 181](#), which called for partitioning Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab States with international administration over Jerusalem, there was a debate both within the Zionist leadership as well as among foreign powers about how to implement partition.

Between November 1947 and May 1948, violence between Jews and Arabs, both in Palestine and in other Arab countries where Jews lived increased. Despite pressure from the United States, Britain and the UN to hold off on declaring a Jewish state, David Ben-Gurion and other leaders did not want to miss the opportunity provided by the UN vote to declare independence.

Divide the students into six groups. Each group will be responsible for creating a section (1-3 paragraphs) of a draft declaration of independence. The sections should answer the following:

- What is the connection of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel?
- What legal right do the Jews have to declare an independent state?
- What will the state be called and how will it function?
- What rights will citizens have in the new state?
- What message should be delivered to Jews around the world?
- What message should be delivered to the Arabs in Palestine and surrounding countries?

Have each group present their sections to the rest of the class. This could also be done as an expanded activity where you engage members of the community to hear the students present their case for a Jewish State in May 1948.

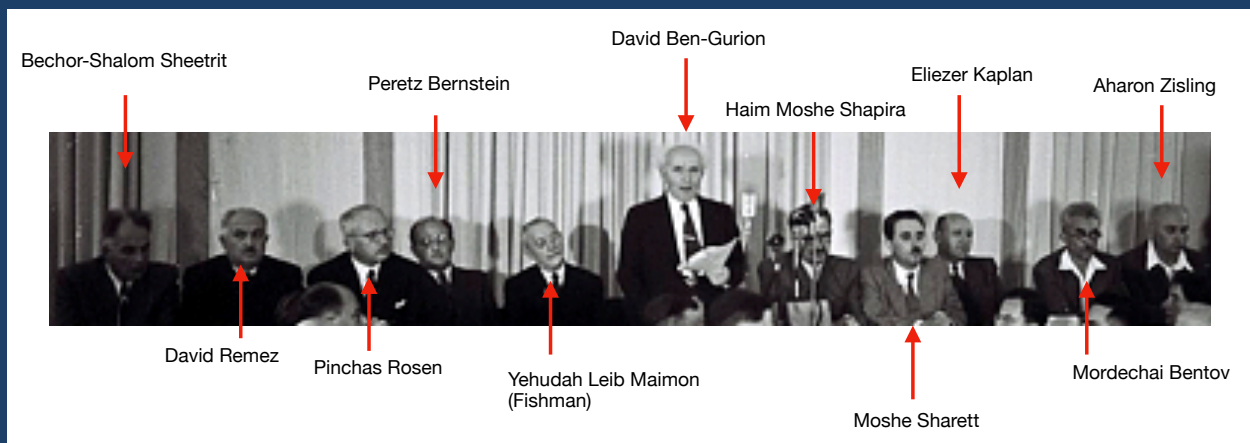
After the students have shared their draft section, compare them to the actual contents of the Declaration linked on the previous page.

Research Project

Here is a zoomed in view of the photo of David Ben-Gurion reciting the Declaration of Independence on May 14, 1948 from the previous page. We've added the names of those who were sitting on the dais with Ben-Gurion for this historic moment. Assign students one of the individuals and have them research the individual and present what they learned.

Some questions to guide them:

- Where was the person born?
- When did they make Aliyah?
- What contributions did they make before the establishment of the state? after?

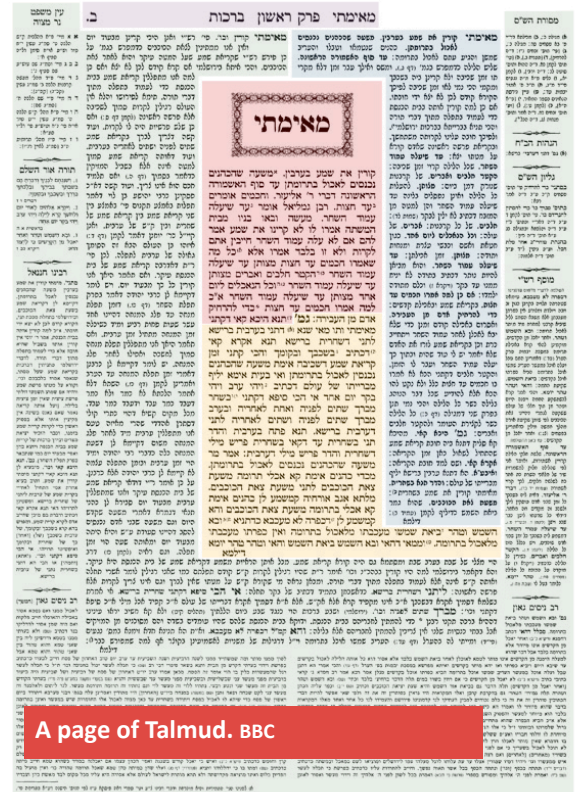


Tractate Israel

A tractate is a section of the Talmud, the collection of oral and written Jewish laws and rabbinic discussions.

A traditional page of Talmud has several elements:

- **The Mishnah (Pink)** - the oral law that was first written in Jerusalem in 200 CE.
- **The Gemara (Yellow)** - a collection of discussions on the Mishnah held by various rabbis between 200 CE and 500 CE. There were actually two editions of the Gemara. The first was compiled in Jerusalem (Jerusalem Talmud) around 400 CE and the second was compiled in Babylonia (Babylonian Talmud, or usually just the Talmud) about 100 years later. Together the Mishnah and Gemara make up the Talmud.
- **Rashi (Blue) and Tosafot (Green) commentaries** - Notes and discussions on the Mishnah and Gemara by Rashi, an 11th century French rabbinic scholar and the Tosafot (literally meaning additions), other leading scholars from the 12th and 13th centuries



In this activity, we will use the text of Israel's Declaration of Independence to create a new Talmudic Tractate on the State of Israel. Students will use phrases from the document to form the Mishnah and Gemara. They will then share their page with others to create their own commentaries.

Divide students into groups and provide each group with the Talmud template and the Declaration of Independence phrases found on the next two pages. They can print both at home or as an alternative, you can create a communal page on a shared wall program such as [Padlet](#) or in Google Docs. If you want to make the activity more in depth, don't give students the phrases but have them analyze and choose their own key phrases from the actual declaration (linked on page 1)

In creating their Mishnah, students should choose the phrases they feel are most important in terms of what Israel represents for them. If they wish to add additional questions or comments (Gemara) they should do so in the box. They will then share their page other students in one of the ways described above. Once students have shared their pages or posted in a community page, other students can add additional commentary/questions on the outside margins (Rashi and Tosafot).

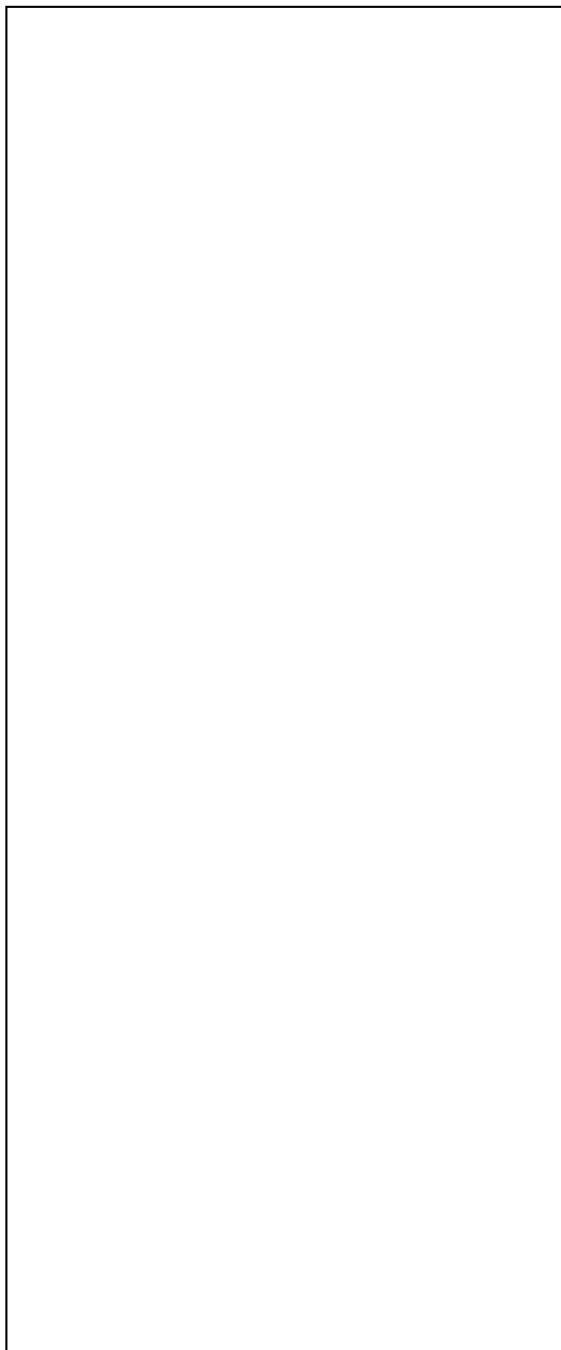
Discuss: Why did they choose the phrases that they did? Why do they think these phrases were included in Israel's Declaration of Independence?

Intentions versus outcomes - What happens when we are not living up to the ideals we set for ourself or what happens when we accomplish a goal?

An additional activity suggestion is to distribute each of the labels to a group of students and have them define or give an example of the phrase from the document: For example: birthplace of the Jewish People - the Temple in Jerusalem was the center of Jewish religious and political life for Jews in the ancient world.

מסכת ישראל

Tractate Israel



The birthplace of the
Jewish People

It will ensure complete equality of
social and political rights to all its
inhabitants irrespective of
religion, race or sex

Here their spiritual, religious and
political identity were shaped

It will guarantee freedom of
religion, conscience, language,
education and culture.

The people kept faith throughout
their dispersion and never ceased
to pray and hope for their return.

It will safeguard the holy places
of all religions.

In 5657 (1897) the First Zionist
Congress . . . proclaimed the
right of the Jewish people to
national rebirth.

It will take steps to bring about
the economic union of the whole
of Eretz Israel

[The right to rebuild a national
home] was recognized in the
Balfour Declaration of the 2nd
November 1917.

We Appeal . . . to the Arab
inhabitants of the State of Israel
to preserve peace and participate
in the upbuilding of the State on
the basis of full and equal
citizenship.

The massacre of millions of Jews
in Europe was another clear
demonstration of the urgency of
solving the problem of its
homelessness.

We extend our hands to all
neighbouring states and their
peoples in an offer of peace and
good neighbourliness.

On the 29th November, 1947, the
United Nations General Assembly
passed a resolution calling for the
establishment of a Jewish State in
Eretz Israel.

We appeal to the Jewish people
throughout the Diaspora to rally
round of the Jews of Eretz Israel
in the tasks of immigration and
upbuilding.

This right is the natural right of
the Jewish people to be masters
of their own fate, like all other
nations, in their own sovereign
State.

Placing our trust in the [Rock of
Israel].

The State of Israel will be open
for Jewish immigration and for
the Ingathering of the Exiles.

It will be based on freedom,
justice and peace as envisaged by
the prophets of Israel.

Then and Now

Israel and Jewish Peoplehood

For each of the years listed, how would you respond to the following?

You can write single terms, sentences or quotes in the right hand column

	1897 (First Zionist Congress)	1948 (Israel's Independence)	2020 (Today)
Historic What connects the Jewish people to the land of Israel? What historic events justify Jews seeking/declaring/having a state?			
Legal What gives Jews the legal right to seek/declare/have a state?			
Operation How will the state function? What rights will citizens have in the new state?			
Other What else do you think should be included in a Declaration of Independence for a Jewish State?			