

A PROJECT WITNESS MICROSHORT STORIES LESSON PLAN

THE SULTAN WHO SAID NO

*He signed the decree against his own Jewish subjects.
Then did everything in his power to undermine it.*

GRADES 7–8

EPISODE SUMMARY

About This Film



The 1941 Feast of the Throne, as depicted in the microshort. The Sultan seats the chief rabbi at his right; Vichy officials watch from across the table.

After France fell to Nazi Germany in June 1940, the Vichy regime extended its antisemitic legislation to French North Africa. In Morocco, governed as a French Protectorate, real authority lay with the Résident général, General Charles Noguès. But the Sultan's seal was constitutionally required to give French legislation the force of Moroccan law. On October 31, 1940, Sultan Mohammed V — thirty-one years old, in office since 1927 — affixed his Great Seal to the Moroccan application of the Vichy *Statut des Juifs*.

The legislation imposed quotas on Jewish participation in the professions, restrictions on property, census obligations, and — in some cities, particularly Fez — the forced relocation of Jews from European neighborhoods back into the mellahs, causing severe overcrowding and disease. Morocco's Jewish community of roughly 250,000 was subjected to real persecution under these Vichy measures.

However, no documented deportations of Moroccan Jews from Morocco to Nazi extermination camps took place. Mohammed V is widely remembered for symbolic acts of solidarity: he reportedly told Jewish leaders that the decrees changed nothing and they remained his subjects, and at the November 1941 Feast of the Throne he invited rabbis and Jewish notables as guests of honor — a public signal of protection performed in front of Vichy officials. The historical record shows a leader with limited but meaningful power who used symbolic leverage and administrative delay to protect his Jewish subjects from the worst outcomes — even as real discrimination and hardship occurred.

TIME

45 min core / 90 min with extensions

MATERIALS

Device to play video; printed discussion questions (optional).

CONTENT ADVISORY

Low intensity. Names real persecution; no violence on screen. The heaviest moments are conceptual: a royal seal that hovers over wax before it presses, the disappearing decree, the hand on the rabbi's shoulder, the empty platform that stays empty.

TEACHER NOTE

Mohammed V's protection was real but not absolute. Students should understand that meaningful allyship can coexist with incomplete resistance. The historical record is genuinely complicated, and that complexity is the lesson.

DRIVING QUESTION

What is meaningful resistance when refusal is not survivable?

Mohammed V signed the decree. Mohammed V undermined what he signed. The same hand did both things, within a system he could not overthrow. The question this lesson sits with is whether what he did counts as resistance, what it would mean if it did, and what we owe to a story whose most famous line is collective memory rather than secured transcript.

LESSON OBJECTIVES · GRADES 7–8

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. **Define** the terms *Vichy regime*, *protectorate*, *mellah*, and *allyship*, and **describe**, in their own words, why Morocco was governed differently from occupied France.
2. **Identify** two specific actions Sultan Mohammed V took to protect Moroccan Jews, and **recall** one specific limit on his power.
3. **Construct** a short letter or paragraph (1–2 paragraphs) from the perspective of a Moroccan Jewish family member responding to the Sultan's gesture at the Feast of the Throne.

STEP 1 OF 4

Watch



Sultan Mohammed V, archival portrait c. 1950. Source: archival, public domain.

Vocabulary Preview

Vichy Regime

The French government that collaborated with Nazi Germany after France fell in 1940, enacting antisemitic laws that applied both in France and in French-controlled territories abroad.

Protectorate

A territory controlled by a stronger foreign power that nominally retains its own government. Morocco was a French Protectorate, meaning France governed through Moroccan institutions including the Sultan's court.

Anti-Jewish Statutes

Laws that stripped Jewish people of rights, jobs, and property — used by the Vichy government to systematically persecute Jews in France and its territories.

Allyship

Using one's own position, voice, or power to support and protect a group facing discrimination or danger.

Mellah

The traditional Jewish quarter of a Moroccan city, where Jewish families lived in established communities for centuries before Vichy. Vichy laws forced some Jews back into mellahs from European neighborhoods.

Anticipation

THINK ABOUT IT

Can a leader protect people even when they don't have full power to stop what's happening? What does it mean to "do what you can" when you can't do everything? Write two or three sentences before we watch. The question is not whether he should have signed. Refusing was not an option that would have helped anyone. The question is what he chose to do with the limited power he still had.

View the Microshort — 90 Seconds

Show the film in full without interruption. Students should not write during the film.

The goal is full, attentive viewing.

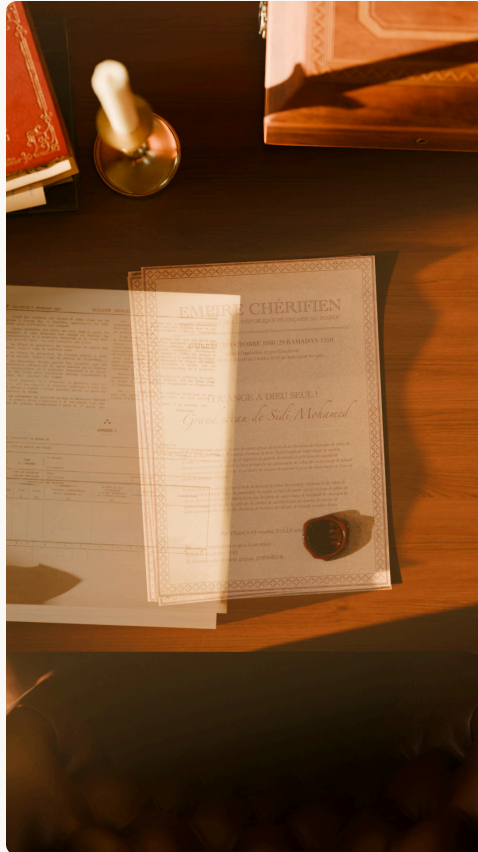
Watch: projectwitness.org/videos/microshort-ep4-the-sultan



Scan with any phone camera, or paste the link above into a browser.

STEP 2 OF 4

Analyze



The signed Vichy decree disappears beneath a stack of papers — the film's visual shorthand for the documented administrative resistance.

Comprehension Questions

1. Who was Mohammed V? What was his role in Morocco during World War II?
2. What was happening in Morocco during the war? What did Vichy rule mean for Jewish Moroccans?
3. How did Mohammed V try to protect the Jewish community? Name at least two specific actions.
4. Did his protection work completely? What still happened to Moroccan Jews under Vichy rule?

Visual Storytelling

5. The film uses a Mediterranean color palette — warm amber tones and cobalt blues. How does this visual style reflect the setting?
6. The film opens on a candle and a royal seal hovering above red wax. The seal does not press right away. What does that hovering tell us before any voice has spoken?
7. The film is only 90 seconds. Did it feel complete? What choices did the filmmakers make to convey a complicated story in so little time?

STEP 3 OF 4

Create



The 1941 Feast of the Throne. A single brass candelabra in the foreground implies the entire hall.

Letter Writing

Imagine you are a Jewish child living in the mellah of Rabat in 1941. You hear that the Sultan invited Jewish leaders to the Feast of the Throne — a public ceremony, attended by thousands, where Mohammed V seated rabbis and Jewish notables as guests of honor. Write a short letter to a family member describing what this news means to you and your community.

Your letter should include:

- What life has been like since the new laws were announced.
- What you felt when you heard about the Sultan's gesture.
- What you hope — and what you are still afraid of.

Write 1–2 paragraphs. Try to capture both the hope and the uncertainty of that moment.

STEP 4 OF 4

Reflect



The same mother and daughter whose home was searched in Beat 2, now unharmed at the threshold of their home, in warm late-afternoon light. The film's closing image before the end card.

One-Sentence Takeaway

Write the single most important thing you are taking away from this lesson in one complete sentence. Then answer: Can someone be a hero even if they couldn't solve the whole problem? What does it mean to do the right thing when your power is limited?

EXIT PROMPT

Complete both parts on a notecard or in your journal:

1. The most important thing I'm taking from this story is: ____
2. Can someone be a hero even if they couldn't solve the whole problem? My answer is: ____
3. One small thing I could do to help someone, even when I can't fix everything, is: ____ Limited power, not solving everything. "I'm not sure yet" is an acceptable answer.

Teacher note: Push the last blank toward a specific, real situation — not being good in the abstract. Keep it honest: doing the right thing with limited power means helping where you can, not solving everything. "I'm not sure yet" is an acceptable answer.

“There are no Jews in Morocco, only Moroccan subjects.”

— As remembered by those he protected · Mohammed V, c. 1940–1941

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Going Deeper

Research Project • Comparing Acts of Protection

Mohammed V was not the only leader or community who protected Jews during the Holocaust. Research one other example — the Danish rescue of Jews in 1943, the village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in France, or Bulgarian citizens who resisted deportation orders. Your research should include:

- Who was protected, and by whom.
- What methods were used to protect them.
- What the outcome was.
- What risks the protectors took.

Create a comparison poster or slide that places your example alongside Mohammed V's story. What do these cases have in common? What is different?

APPENDIX

Standards Alignment

FRAMEWORK	STANDARDS (GRADES 7-8)
Common Core ELA	RI.7.1, RI.7.2, RI.7.6, W.7.2, SL.7.1
C3 Social Studies	D2.His.1.6-8, D2.His.3.6-8, D2.His.14.6-8
Florida B.E.S.T.	ELA.7.R.2.1, ELA.7.R.3.2, ELA.7.C.1.3
Texas TEKS	ELAR 7.6(A), 7.8(A), 7.10(A)
California HSS	7.10
CASEL SEL	Self-awareness, Social awareness

This lesson supports the Holocaust education mandates of more than 25 U.S. states. It addresses New York DASA goals around allyship, interfaith solidarity, and using one's position to protect others.

PRIMARY SOURCE CITATION

The Dahir of 31 October 1940

Dahir du 31 octobre 1940 (29 ramadan 1359) relatif à l'application en zone française de l'Empire chérifien de la loi du 3 octobre 1940 portant statut des juifs.

Sealed by Sultan Sidi Mohammed ben Youssef, 31 October 1940. Countersigned for promulgation by Charles Noguès. Published in *Bulletin officiel de l'Empire chérifien*, N° 1463, 8 novembre 1940, pages 1054–1056.

Full PDF: archive.gazettes.africa