

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 9–10

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.
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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 9–10

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

1. **Analyze** the difference between formal compliance and substantive resistance in Mohammed V's response to Vichy demands, citing at least two specific actions.
2. **Explain** the concept of symbolic power and how it differs from legal or military power, using the 1941 Feast of the Throne as evidence.
3. **Construct** a 150–200-word argumentative paragraph (MEAL structure) on whether Mohammed V should be recognized as Righteous Among the Nations, supported by evidence from the film and historical context.

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.

Dahir

A royal decree of the Sultan of Morocco. Vichy laws required the Sultan's dahir to take effect in Morocco; the Dahir of 31 October 1940 extended the antisemitic *Statut des Juifs* to Moroccan jurisdiction.

Symbolic Power

Power exercised through gestures, presence, and meaning rather than legal force. The Sultan's hosting of Jewish leaders at his table was symbolic power — meaningful precisely because it was performed in public.

Anticipation

THINK ABOUT IT

The film is titled *The Sultan Who Said No*. But history shows he also signed the anti-Jewish statutes. What might it mean to say “no” while also complying? Is this a contradiction or something more complex?

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.

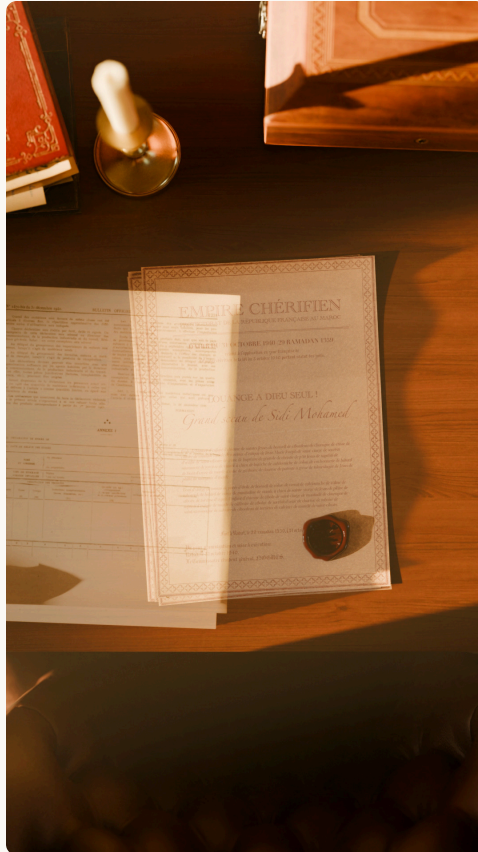
Watch: projectwitness.org/videos/microshort-ep4-the-sultan



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.

Text-Dependent Analysis

1. The film presents Mohammed V as a protector, but it also acknowledges the anti-Jewish statutes. How does the narration handle this tension? What phrase or moment best captures the complexity?
2. Identify one filmmaking choice — color palette, narration style, pacing, or sound — and explain how it contributes to the film's argument about Mohammed V's significance.
3. The logline uses the phrase “symbolic power.” What is symbolic power? How is it different from legal or military power? Is it less real?
4. The film returns to the same mother and daughter in Beat 2 (their home being searched) and Beat 5D (walking unharmed down the mellah into golden light). What is the filmmaker arguing by reusing the same characters?

Historical Sourcing

5. How do we verify what Mohammed V actually said or did? What kinds of sources would historians need to confirm the famous quote attributed to him?
6. Mohammed V has not been recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations. What criteria does Yad Vashem use? Why might his actions not meet that standard?
7. What questions does the film leave unanswered that you would want to investigate further?

STEP 3 OF 4

Create



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

Argumentative Paragraph • MEAL Format

Mohammed V both signed the Vichy anti-Jewish statutes and took symbolic actions to protect the Jewish community of Morocco — including publicly hosting Jewish leaders at the Feast of the Throne and reportedly telling them that the decrees changed nothing. Write one well-developed argumentative paragraph using the MEAL structure (**M**ain claim, **E**vidence, **A**nalysis, **L**ink) that answers the following question:

P R O M P T

Should Mohammed V be recognized as Righteous Among the Nations, given that he both signed the anti-Jewish statutes and took symbolic actions to protect Jews? Make a claim and support it with evidence from the film and historical context.

Your paragraph should be 150–200 words. Underline your main claim sentence. Circle your evidence.

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.

Sentence Frame Reflection

Complete the following sentence frame as a written reflection. You may write as many sentences as you need to complete each thought — the frame is a starting point, not a limit. Be specific. The strongest reflections name something particular they learned, not just general impressions.

“This story complicated my understanding of allyship because _____. I used to think being an ally meant _____. Now I realize it can also mean _____. One situation where I could use whatever position or voice I have to protect someone is _____. Limited power, not solving everything. “I’m not sure yet” is an acceptable answer.”

Teacher note: Push the new closing blank toward a specific, real situation — not allyship in the abstract. Keep it honest: here it means using whatever limited power you have, not solving everything. “I’m not sure yet” is an acceptable answer.

Share your reflection with a partner. Where do your reflections overlap? Where do they diverge? What might explain the difference?

“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 Essay · The Sephardic and Mizrahi Experience

🕒 SCOPE

This is a multi-day research project, not a single-period extension. Plan for at least 3 class periods plus homework time.

Historiographic gaps exist for institutional, geographic, and linguistic reasons: most Holocaust scholarship grew up in English- and German-language institutions focused on Europe; Moroccan-Jewish primary sources are largely in Judeo-Arabic, French, or Hebrew; the postwar emigration that scattered the community also scattered its archives.

The Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish experience during the Holocaust is less widely taught than the Ashkenazi experience. Research one Sephardic or Mizrahi community affected by Holocaust-era persecution:

- The Jews of Salonika (Thessaloniki), Greece — the largest Sephardic community in Europe, nearly destroyed in 1943.
- The Jews of Rhodes (Dodecanese Islands), deported to Auschwitz in 1944.
- The Jews of Libya under Italian and German occupation.
- The Jews of Iraq, who faced the Farhud pogrom of 1941.
- The Jews of Tunisia under German occupation in 1942–43.

Write a 1-page summary of what happened and why this story is less well-known than the Ashkenazi Holocaust narrative.

APPENDIX

Standards Alignment

FRAMEWORK	STANDARDS (GRADES 9-10)
Common Core ELA	RI.9-10.1, RI.9-10.4, RI.9-10.6, W.9-10.1, SL.9-10.1
C3 Social Studies	D2.His.1.9-12, D2.His.3.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12
Florida B.E.S.T.	ELA.910.R.2.1, ELA.910.R.3.2, ELA.910.C.1.3; SS.912.W.7.6
Texas TEKS	ELAR 9.6(A), 9.8(A); WH.15(A–D)
California HSS	10.8.1–10.8.6
CASEL SEL	+ Responsible decision-making

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