

Spring Festivals of the Middle East

Overview:

In this lesson plan, students will investigate spring festivals across the globe focusing on the Middle East. The lesson begins with a discussion of spring festivals associated with the vernal equinox and the changing of seasons and continues into more specific inquiry into spring festivals in the Middle East. By learning more about the particulars of the Middle East and its celebrations, students will start to draw parallels between the Middle East and their own forms of celebration. This lesson will aid students in their examination of the Middle East, its cultures, and its peoples, and can also be paired with units on Ramadan and Middle Eastern Festivals.

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Consider festivals that take place in the spring and associations about spring.
2. Research spring festivals from the Middle East. (See Middle Eastern Festivals Information Sheet, as well as the annotated bibliography for further assistance.)
3. Examine the festivals of the Middle East and compare them to other spring festivals.
4. Create Basant festival kites.

Activity:

1. To begin the lesson plan, ask the students which festivals they know of that are celebrated in the spring. Spring festivals are important across the globe, from our May Day celebrations to the Chinese New Year to various holidays observed in the spring and related to the arrival of warmer weather and the changing seasons. Some spring festivals like the Christian holiday Easter are religious in orientation, while many Middle Eastern spring festivals like Nowruz were once religious and have now become secular festivals. Ask students to think about the ways in which these festivals are celebrated and the objects and beliefs that are associated with them (eggs, new life, flowers, Easter bunny, Chinese dragons, etc.).
2. Spring Group Poem
Students should secretly write one word on an index card that relates to spring. Students may color or embellish their cards for a more creative product. Have students turn in the cards anonymously, exchange the cards, and then have the students paste their fellow students' word on a larger sheet of paper making a spring poem out of the words. The one rule is that no one can move a card once it has been placed on the larger sheet. Read the poem aloud. Discuss the types of associations and meanings linked to spring and its festivals. Hang the poem in the classroom for a spring decoration. (After the research and comparative portion of the lesson plan, return to the poem and ask students if there are now new words that they would include in the spring poem.)
3. After reviewing the spring poem, discuss why spring is an important time of the year to celebrate.

- a. What meaning does the time of year have?
 - b. How is weather a factor in spring celebrations? (vernal equinox)
 - c. Why do you think that spring festivals are particularly important in the cultures of the Middle East? (geographic locations in the desert)
4. Research Projects
- Explain to students the prevalence of Spring Festivals in the Middle East. Assign students one of the Middle Eastern spring festivals and have them research the festival to report to the class. (See Middle Eastern Festivals Information Sheet)
- a. Sham el-Nessim in Egypt
 - b. Nowrūz in countries across the Middle East (The students or groups may be divided into specific areas or peoples as different groups and countries celebrate Nowruz differently: Iran, Afghanistan, Kurdish peoples in Turkey, etc.)
 - c. Hala Festival in Kuwait
 - d. Keipi in Georgia (Although this festival tradition is no longer only observed in the spring, have students research its spring beginnings.)
 - e. Basant in Pakistan
5. Ask students to compare the spring festivals of the Middle East with each other. (This lesson plan could be extended into other cultures as well, having students research spring festivals across the globe. The Chinese New Year and similar kite celebrations in China and Japan are great comparisons.)
- a. What do they have in common? Are their similar objects or ideas that reappear?
 - b. Do you see any similarities between festivals that you celebrate and those that people in the Middle East celebrate? Similar symbols or activities? (Easter, May Day, Chinese New Year, etc.)
 - c. What is your favorite spring Middle Eastern festival? Why?
6. Have students create their own kites in the spirit of the Basant festivals in Pakistan. Provide each student with construction paper in the shape of a simple kite and appropriate art supplies. Ask each student to design a kite that reflects some aspect of Middle Eastern Spring festivals. Hang the kites alongside the updated Spring Poem.