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Jews Indigenous to the
Middle East and North Africa

SEPHARDIC & MIZRAHI PASSOVER & MIMOUNA GUIDE



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Some 2,400 years ago, a Jerusalem-based man named Hananiah wrote his brother Jedoniah a letter that has since become the earliest discovered record of Passover rituals. The letter, written in Aramaic, informed Jedoniah that the Persian King Darius II had granted the Jewish community of Elephantine, an island in the Nile River in Egypt, permission to observe Passover. This "Passover Letter," predates the Dead Sea Scrolls by four centuries and is now part of the Elephantine Archive. It includes the following instructions:

"Count 14 [days in Nisan] and at [twilight?] on the 14th [from twilight observe Pesach?] from the 15th day to the 21st day of [Nisan] observe the festival of unleavened bread, eat unleavened bread for seven days. Do not work on the 15th and 21st days of Nisan ... do not drink. ... And everything that is leaven take into your rooms and seal up between these days."

In it, we see first-hand how Passover rituals have evolved and changed and we are reminded of the fluidity of Jewish practices. We are reminded that what seems normal to each of us is completely relative and changes based on time, place, and circumstance. However, we are also reminded of the universal Jewish imperative of observing our Hebrew lunar calendar and of the central importance of Passover.

I N T R O D U C T I O N



J I M E N A



The Jewish community of Elephantine is one of thousands of Jewish communities spread throughout the lands of the Middle East and North Africa that sustained or thrived for millennia, and then for a multitude of reasons, disappeared. It is our hope that this guide will provide a glimpse into how diverse Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish communities through the ages have observed Passover.

We are pleased to introduce you to the unique Libyan *Bsisa* ceremony, which honors the central role of women during Passover. We offer you information on *Mimouna*, the post-Passover celebration that's now a nationally recognized holiday in Israel. We encourage you to read about how the four questions are recited differently in Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) and we invite you to learn about why Sephardic and Mizrah Jews eat kitniyot (grains/seeds/legumes) on Passover. But mostly, we invite you to participate.

In honor of our Sephardic and Mizrahi ancestors, and in full recognition of the incredible diversity of Mizrahi and Sephardic Passover customs, this guide is by no means complete nor comprehensive. Like traditions themselves, this is a fluid document, and we invite our Sephardic and Mizrahi brothers and sisters around the world to add to it, to help ensure that the traditions of our forefathers and mothers will long be preserved and shared.

In celebration of freedom,
the JIMENA family



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I N T R O D U C T I O N



J I M E N A



Moroccan Passover traditions are steeped in a rich culture and heritage that has been passed down for millenia. One of the more unique customs, known as the symbolic *Bibhilu* blessing, takes place at the beginning of the seder. The head of the household will hold the seder plate over each guests's head and recite the following blessing in honor of each individual's divine freedom:

"Bibhilu yatšanu mi-miṣrayim, halachma 'anya bené ḥorin" (In haste, we went out of Egypt with our bread of affliction and now we are free)

Perhaps the most well known Moroccan Passover tradition is *Mimouna* which takes place at the end of passover. *Mimouna* is the celebration of spring's bounty and includes delicious sweets and foods prepared with flour, honey, milk and butter. A *Mimouna* favorite is *Mufletta*, a Moroccan Jewish crepe adorned with honey, nuts, fruits or jams.

Friends, family, and neighbors celebrate and feast from sunset on the last day of Passover until the following night. In Israel it has become so popular that it's grown into a nationally recognized holiday.

Please see our *Mimouna* supplement at the end of this document for more!

M O R O C C O



Bibhilu Blessing at a Moroccan-Israeli Seder

**Moroccan Haggadah Manuscript from
Israel's National Library.**

**Ha-Layla HazeH: Sephardic Customs
and Readings for the Pesah Seder from
Sephardic Education Center**



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M O R O C C O



J I M E N A



Algeria gained independence from France in 1962 and by 1963 had a nationality code in place which denied Algerian citizenship to all non-Muslims. As a result, the vast majority of Algerian Jews relocated to France taking their ancient Sephardic heritage and culture with them.

Algerian seders almost always include recipes that are steeped in Western Mediterranean Sephardic culture, some of which can be traced back to Spain's Golden Age. A notable delicacy among Algerian Jews on Passover are meat patties made with almonds, saffron, and peas known by most French-speaking Algerian Jews as *Boulettes de Viande avec des Petits Pois*.

Another Algerian passover favorite is a matzah and pea omelet, prepared in meat drippings as opposed to oil, and held together like a quiche.

As Algeria and Morocco border each other, there are many Algerian Jews who also celebrate Mimouna with the addition of *Mouna*, a sweet bread that is a staple of the gathering.

A L G E R I A



World Jewish Congress Video on Algerian Jewish History featuring testimonies from JIMENA's Oral History Archive



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ALGERIA



J I M E N A



Tunisia was once a thriving center of Jewish life in North Africa, with an estimated 105,000 individuals living in communities throughout the country. Today roughly 1,000 Jewish people remain in Tunisia, primarily on the Mediterranean island of Djerba which is home to Africa's oldest synagogue known as *El Ghriba*. Despite the exodus of Jews from Tunisia, the community has persevered and maintained their distinctly North African Sephardic heritage primarily in Israel and France.

Tunisian Passover customs are similar to those of their North African neighbors with some variations. Tunisian Jews traditionally held their Passover seders in both Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic and began the Passover reciting the *Bibhilu* blessing, which celebrates the divinity of spiritual freedom. During the blessing, which is recited for each person at the seder, the seder plate is held above each person's head as they are blessed with freedom. Some Tunisian Jewish families lightly tap the seder plate on each guest's head to remind them of the suffering and oppression endured by our enslaved ancestors in Egypt.

A distinct culinary highlight of the Tunisian Passover seder is a dish called *Msoki*, a stew made with an array of vegetables and lamb. Many Tunisian charoset recipes create a paste that is then rolled into balls with the unique addition of rose water or orange blossom water.

T U N I S I A



**Rabbis at the
entrance of El
Ghriba
Synagogue,
Tunisia 1940's**



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**El Ghriba
Synagogue
Interiors**



TUNISIA



J I M E N A



While Moroccan and Algerian Jewish communities are best known for their post-Passover celebration of Mimouna, Libyan Jews, and many Tunisian Jews as well, partake in the pre-Passover ritual of *Bsisa*, or *El Bsisa*, which takes place on Rosh Hodesh, Nissan, the month that Passover takes place.

Bsisa, an age old ritual practiced by Jews of Libya, in honor of the Mishkan (Tabernacle), the portable sanctuary that housed the ark of the covenant, and was carried through the desert by freed Jewish slaves after the Passover Exodus.

The *Bsisa* ceremony revolves around a dish of the same name which consists of wheat, barley, dried fruits, honey, oil and other sweets all mixed together with a key while a Judeo-Arabic blessing is recited.

Oftentimes women would place their gold jewelry in the mixture to symbolize the gold which was given to the making of the Mishkan, some even placing their wedding ring in the mixture to bless their marriages. After the *Bsisa* ceremony, families would enjoy a large and filling platter of couscous marking the last chametz meal before Passover begins.

L I B Y A



The Jews of Libya had a continued presence from antiquity up until 1967 when the entire community was ethnically cleansed and forced to flee state-sanctioned persecution.



The Benghazi Haggadah: How the Jews of Libya Celebrated Victory Over the Nazis

This is how the Jewish Legion soldiers of the British army set up a Seder in Benghazi, Libya in 1943.



Traditional Libyan Judeo-Arabic Bsisá Blessings



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LIBYA



It could be said that every Passover tradition is Egyptian by default, after all, the Biblical story of Exodus takes place in Egypt! But like every Jewish community in the modern era, Egyptian Jews have unique Passover rituals that have been passed down for millenia.

On Rosh Hodesh Nissan, the month of Passover many Egyptian Jews held a unique ceremony called, Seder Al-Tahwid, which celebrates the miracles of the Exodus.

Another symbolic tradition of Egyptian Jews is a ritual in which each guest at the Passover seder takes a matzo wrapped in a napkin and slings it over their right shoulder while the seder leader asks "where are you from?" and they answer "Egypt." The leader then asks "where are you going?" and they answer "Jerusalem!"

For Egyptian Jews who fled persecution in the twentieth century, the Passover holiday represents not only the Biblical Exodus but the contemporary exodus in which over 80,000 Jews left Egypt. Jewish refugee advocate and Egyptian Jewish leader, Joseph Abdel Wahed (Z"l) shares a special passover prayer to honor the one million Jewish refugees from North Africa and the Middle East.

E G Y P T



"ON THIS PASSOVER AND ON EVERY PASSOVER IN THE FUTURE, WHEN WE EAT MATZAH AND THE BITTER HERBS, WE MUST CHERISH THE MEMORIES OF OUR FORGOTTEN BROTHERS AND SISTERS.

AND AS JEWS, ALWAYS YEARNING FOR THE WINDS OF FREEDOM, WE SAY TO THEM: WE WILL NOT FORGET YOU."

- Excerpt from Joseph Abdel Wahed's Passover Prayer for the Jewish Refugees of the Middle East & North Africa



My family's Karaite-style Passover

Never mind the gefilte fish and brisket, the mass-produced, cardboard-like matzah and...

 Jewish Journal / Apr 4, 2012

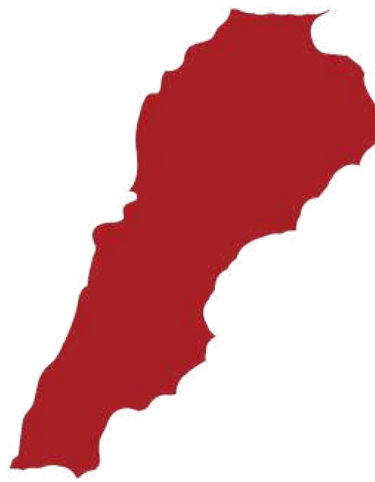


J I M E N A

E G Y P T



J I M E N A

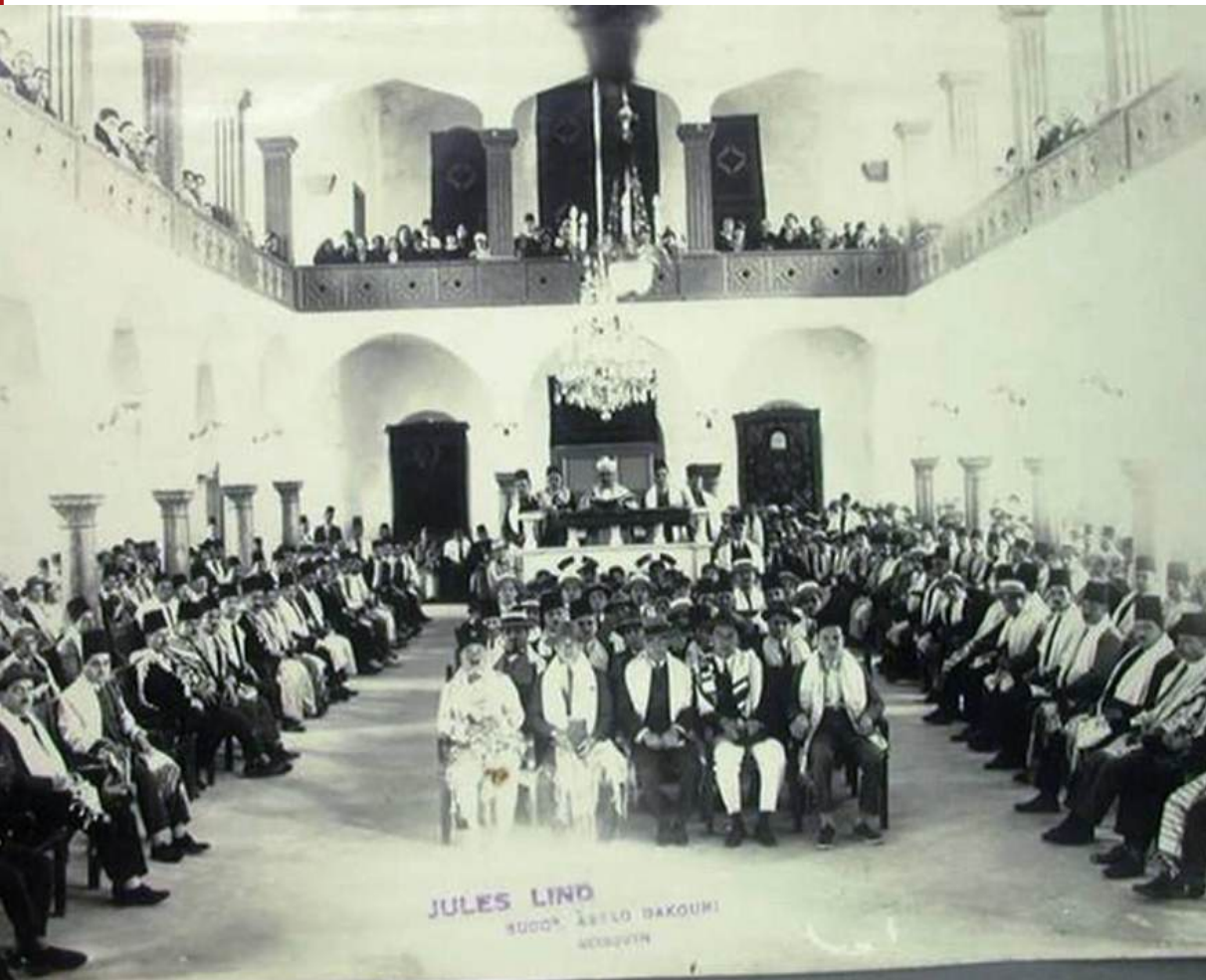
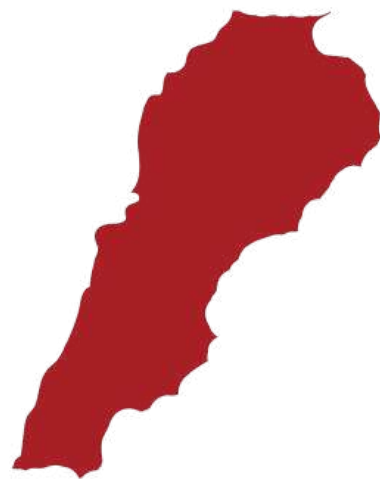


Lebanon's unique Jewish history dates back to the biblical era with Jewish communities existing in Tripoli, Sidon, and Tyre. The Jewish communities of Lebanon have always been small and fluid with Jewish refugees from neighboring countries seeking refuge from political instability within Lebanon.

The community endured until 1975 when conditions in Lebanon significantly deteriorated with the outbreak of the Muslim-Christian Civil War which lasted 15 years. Jewish infrastructure in Beirut was destroyed and Syria's growing presence and influence in the country, compelled most of Lebanon's remaining 1,800 Jews to flee.

Many of the Passover traditions Lebanese Jews were accustomed to were very similar to the Jews in neighboring Syria, however, Lebanese cuisine is infused into the seder meal. A favorite among Jews from Lebanon is what some would refer to as a national food of Lebanon and Syria, *Kibbeh*, but made with rice or matzo meal instead of cracked wheat.

L E B A N O N



Lebanese Jews praying at the Magen-Abraham Synagogue in Beirut, Lebanon. 1926

Jewish Language Project's Exploration of Middle Eastern Jewish Passover Traditions



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LEBANON



J I M E N A



Abraham is said to have stopped in Syria on his journey to the land of Canaan, sharing his goat's milk with the poor. Haleb or Aleppo, means "he milked" and it's said that the city that once contained the oldest Jewish manuscripts and Torah scrolls, was named after Abraham's visit there. Jews are believed to have had a continuous presence in Syria since the days of King David until the 1990s when the Jewish community was finally granted visas to leave.

With the long history of Jewry in Syria, comes a rich culture steeped in tradition, and this is reflected in the Passover rituals and customs. The day before Passover begins is known as the Fast of the Firstborn (*ta'anit bechorot*) and was strictly observed by all firstborn Syrian Jewish men and women as a way to express gratitude for the salvation of Jewish lives during the Egyptian plague of the firstborn.

One unique Syrian Jewish custom is the the Yachat portion of the seder when a piece of matzah is broken in half, with one half going in the middle of a stack of 3 pieces of matzah and the other being hidden as the afikomen, representing the broken-heartedness and injustice we lived with. Syrian Jews add a ritual rooted in Kabbalistic practice, breaking the matzah pieces into the shapes of the Hebrew letters "daled" and "vav" which correspond to numbers adding up to 10, representing the 10 illuminations of G-d known as Sefirot.

S Y R I A



[A global hour of Sephardic Passover Insights with Sephardic Rabbis from around the world including: Rabbi Daniel Bouskila \(LA\), Rabbi Moshe Benzaquen \(LA\), Rabbi Nissim Elnevace \(NYC\), Rabbi Eli Abadie \(NYC\), Rabbi Daniel Kahana \(NYC\), Rabbi Ben Hassan \(Seattle\), Rabbi Naftali Haleva \(Turkey\), Rabbi Ilan Acoca \(New Jersey\), & Rabbi Benito Garzon \(Israel\).](#)



J I M E N A

PASSOVER AROUND THE WORLD

 SARAH BUNIN BENOR INTRODUCTION TO JEWISH LANGUAGES	 JEWLIA EISENBERG & JEREMIAH LOCKWOOD YIDDISH	 ASHER SHASHO LEVY JUDEO-ARABIC	 CHLOÉ POURMORADY JUDEO-PERSIAN, LADINO, ETC.
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See more at jewishlanguages.org/Passover

*Ehad Mi Yodey'a / Echad Mi Yodea (Who Knows One)
Traditional Passover Song in Syrian Judeo-Arabic with
Chloe Pourmorady and Asher Shasho-Levy*

S Y R I A



J I M E N A



Iraqi Jews trace their lineage to the destruction of Solomon's holy Temple of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. Under the authority of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, Israel's prophets, sages and kings were brought as captive slaves to the rivers of Babylon in modern day Iraq. This resulted in Iraq becoming a central locale of Jewish scholarship and modern practice that gave birth to the writing of the Babylonian Talmud and the flourishing of rabbinic Judaism. Modern day Iraqi, Iranian, and Caucus Jews trace their lineage to Babylon's Jewish captives.

Jews lived continuously in Iraq for over 2,500 years until the 1950s, when the vast majority of the country's 150,000 Jews fled to Israel following years of oppression and persecution. Iraqi Jewish traditions can be seen across Europe, the US, Israel, and even in India where many Iraqi Jews emigrated to in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Iraqi Jews around the world are proud of their delicious charoset recipe which is a simple mix of date syrup and ground nuts. Another staple in many Iraqi Jewish homes during Passover is Massafan, cookies made of almond flour, ground cardamom, sugar, egg whites, and rose water.

I R A Q



Some Iraqi Jewish families recall memories from their childhoods of their mothers and grandmothers starting Passover preparations three months in advance, sifting through bags of rice and washing them to ensure they are hametz free (Iraqi Jews, like many other Middle Eastern Jewish communities, do not consider rice as hametz).



The Four Questions sung in the Iraqi-Jewish melody.





J I M E N A



More than 90% of Turkish Jews identify as Sephardic, with their ancestors fleeing to the heart of the Ottoman Empire as a result of the Spanish Inquisition that began in 1492. Despite the distance and time spent away from Spain, Turkish Jews held tight to their unique language of Judeo-Spanish or Ladino.

Today the vast majority of Turkish Jews have moved on to Israel, however, Turkey retains a Jewish population of roughly 15,000 individuals.

Traditionally, Turkish Jewish seders were held in Ladino and included a number of special traditions. *Huevos Haminados*, or slow cooked brown eggs, feature prominently in nearly all Turkish Sephardic seders and symbolize the life-giving properties of spring.

Turkish Jews end the holiday with a symbolic ritual for their children. The father or grandfather of the household will throw grass, sweets and coins for the children to pick up. This represents the wish for wealth and prosperity now that we are free, with the grass representing the reeds of the Red Sea we walked through to freedom.

T U R K E Y



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English - Hebrew - Ladino Haggadah

**Had Gadya in Ladino: A Sephardic
Passover Tradition?**

**The Turkish Passover Recipes
Shared by Five Generations of
Women**

TURKEY



The Persian Jewish community is one of the oldest diaspora communities in the world. It is also one which has a unique history compared to its Arab neighbors, given that in the 1940's and 1950's when many Middle Eastern countries saw relations with their Jewish citizens reach all time lows, the Jews of Iran, for the first time in centuries, were enjoying a time of prosperity. This prosperity ended with the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Perhaps the most well known Passover custom of Persian Jews is the section of the seder when they sing Dayenu. In the song we sing the word "Dayenu", which loosely translates to "it would have been enough," 15 times to commemorate the 15 miracles G-d bestowed upon us while freeing us from slavery, exclaiming that each miracle would have been enough on its own. Persian Jews have the custom of whipping each other with spring onions during this song to remind us of the lashings we received while enslaved.

Another Persian custom is guests passing the seder plate from person to person with each individual singing, "*Kadesh, Urchatz, Karpas, Yachatz...*" At very large seders with multiple families, each family will sing together as one unit, otherwise an already long evening would turn into an all nighter!

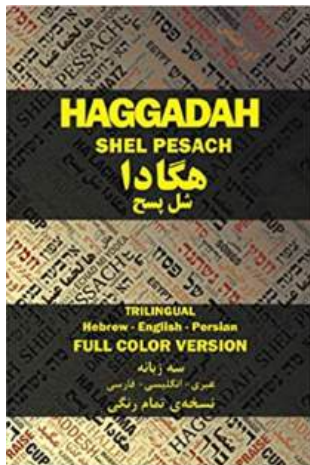
I R A N



Jewish children
in Tehran, Iran
read from the
Haggadah 1970s



Passover Haggadot from Iran



Iranian haroset recipe

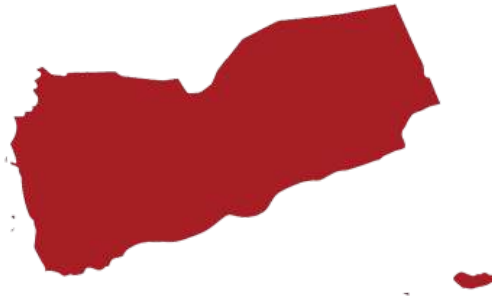


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I R A N



J I M E N A

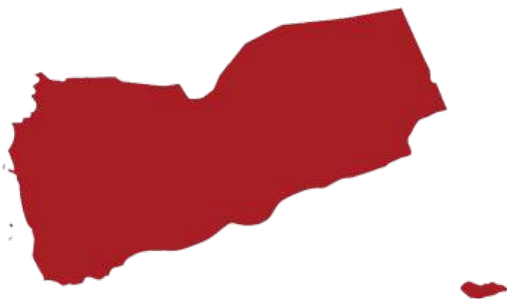


Often referred to as “the most Jewish of all Jews,” the Jews of Yemen maintain an ancient practice of Judaism which predates the customs of Ashkenazi and Sephardic practice. These religious practices set them apart from most other Mizrahi Jews. Exactly how Jews arrived in Yemen is somewhat unclear, with varying legends and historic accounts. Despite this lack of historical clarity, some Yemenite Jews trace their lineage back to biblical times.

Traditionally, Yemenite Jews referred to their charoset recipe as *duka*, which, according to the Tannaim (the sages of the Mishnah) was the food’s name during the days of Jerusalem’s Temple.

Because of their insulated and somewhat isolated existence, Jews in Yemen had many unique practices and customs, so it should come as no surprise that Yemenite Jews have distinct Passover customs and cuisine, the most obvious difference being the matzah. The matzah we have become accustomed to - flat, crispy, square crackers which we buy in boxes, is nothing like what the Jews of Yemen are accustomed to. Yemenite Jews traditionally baked their soft matzah by hand in a clay oven, and it has texture more like pita or flatbread. It is said that this is what matzah was originally like before mass production, and is likely what the unleavened bread of our ancestors fleeing Egypt looked like.

Y E M E N



Yemenite Jewish Passover tables were covered with green vegetables, "adamah" and seder plate items such as duka and hard-boiled eggs, all spread across the table. The Haggadah was read in Judeo-Arabic to accommodate those who didn't understand Hebrew. Like Persian Jews, Yemenite Jews also have a unique Dayenu custom - all the guests lift the table off the ground 3 times!



[Yemenite beef and potato stew recipe](#)

[Yemenite haroset recipe](#)

New to Tel Aviv, this Yemenite Habbani family celebrates Passover 1946



J I M E N A

Y E M E N

WHAT IS MIMOUNA?

Mimouna is a traditional Moroccan-Jewish celebration that begins at nightfall after Passover has ended.

During this colorful celebration Moroccan Jewish women wear their fanciest clothes and open their doors welcoming neighbors, friends, and families to a joyful party filled with sweet food, alcohol and music.

In Morocco, it was common that many Muslims neighbors would help arrange the Mimouna celebrations by preparing chametz sweets for their Jewish friends. Muslims and Jews frequently celebrated Mimouna together, a practice that continues in Morocco until today.

There are many different spiritual interpretations of the Mimouna holiday and its origins, but there is wide agreement that this joyful celebration was a meaningful way to welcome the spring season's hope for fertility, prosperity, friendship, love, and harmony. Tablecloths were covered in colorful flowers, green wheat stalks, and symbolic trays of buttermilk, eggs, dates, and silver coins. Tables were filled with honey, beautiful sweet foods made of chametz and nuts. Mufletta, a thin, fried crepe fritter, is a Mimouna staple that's dipped in honey and fresh butter.



MIMOUNA

WHAT IS MIMOUNA?

Traditionally many Moroccan Jewish families will open their doors to visitors to feast from their lavish spreads. In some Moroccan Jewish communities hosts would bless their guests with a traditional benediction in Arabic, "*Alallah maimouna ambarkha massouda*" meaning "best wishes for a blessed, successful Mimouna."

On the evening of Mimouna, many Jewish families would visit the home of their rabbi to receive a *berachah* (a blessing) and then travel on to the homes of dear relatives. In Morocco it was also common for Jewish people to draw water from wells or to visit the beach on the day of Mimouna.

The custom of Mimouna has become extremely popular in Israel with people celebrating in parks or outdoors with BBQs and music. It has become so commonplace in Israel that employers are now legally required to allow anyone the day off if they request it!



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M I M O U N A

MIMOUNA RECIPES



Moroccan Mint Tea

Mint tea is a staple in the Moroccan diet. It's made several times a day and is easy to make with fresh ingredients - or tea bags if you prefer.



Recipe Ideas for a Moroccan Mimouna Celebration

Moroccan Mimouna celebrations are unique among Jews around the world. It is a celebration at the end of



Moroccan Mufleta Recipe | The Nosh

Before embarking on making my own mufleta, I reached out to some of my Moroccan Jewish friends. The first thing ...



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MIMOUNA

Mimouna Music Playlists

Mimouna Playlist
JIMENA

- 1 Alabina, Habibi
Marrakesh Express 4:22
- 2 Habib Galbi
A-WA 3:22
- 3 Hana Mash Hu Al Yaman
A-WA 4:11
- 4 Mujik Sheli
Bint El Funk 3:32
- 5 Adir Adirim (Featuring Victoria Hanna)
Balkan Beat Box, Victoria Hanna 5:19



Habib Galbi

Share 1/8

ORIENTE

Watch on YouTube

MIMOUNA

MIMOUNA EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES FROM THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF ISRAEL



Video

Mimouna Piyutim

The piyut (Jewish liturgical poem) "Atem Yotze'i Ma'arav" is beautifully documented by Rabbi David Buzaglo, who describes the tangible feeling of human connectedness on this special holiday.



Worksheet

North African Jews

Discover the rich history of the Jewish communities of North Africa through photographs, religious items, newspapers and more from the collections of the NLI.



Blog

Marrying the Torah

To Have and to Hold: at the start of their studies, children in Morocco went through a symbolic wedding ceremony to bond them forever with the Torah.



Lesson Plan

Celebrating Mimouna

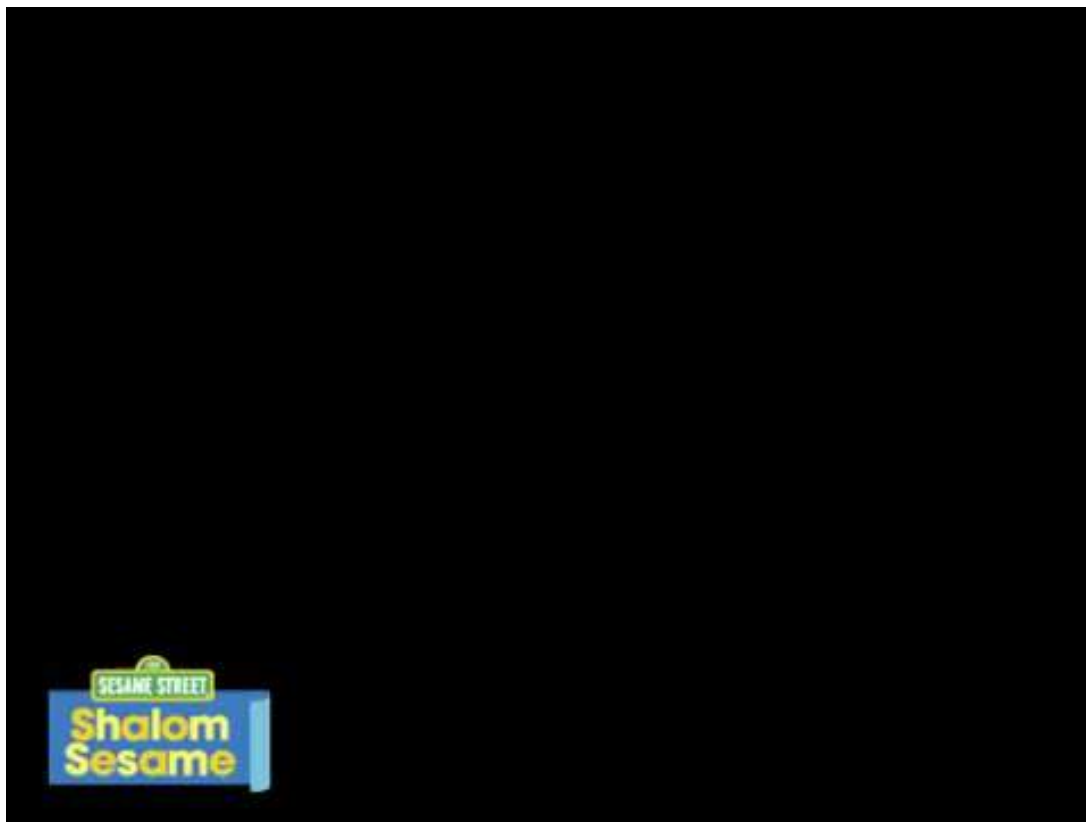
Mimouna is celebrated on the day after Pesach and includes inviting friends and family to share traditional food in the home and in picnics and showcasing Moroccan-Jewish culture.



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MIMOUNA

Shalom Sesame Video for Children (English)



ILTV Feature on Mimouna in Israel



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MIMOUNA

KITNIYOT

As Passover approaches, Jewish individuals around the world begin planning the complicated culinary details of their seders and a week of unleavened bread. Hours are spent sifting through cookbooks and preparing special Passover recipes that have been passed down for generations. Perhaps one of the greatest differences between Sephardic/Mizrahi and non-Sephardic Jews are related to Passover food customs.

Simply stated, the vast majority of Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews eat kitniyot during Passover. Kitniyot refers to legumes, beans, and grains. Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews have rarely ever considered these food items to be in the same category as chametz, or leavened bread. These differences may be rooted in climate and agricultural practices between Northern Europe and the Middle East.



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KITNIYOT

KITNIYOT

"It seems straightforward, concerning customs - such as not eating rice on Passover, which is current in several places - that they are followed because one's forefathers followed them, but one's students are certainly not obliged to follow them.... He should act as did his ancestors, on the basis of 'not abandoning your mother's teaching', and because these are the ways our forefathers took upon themselves and upon their children and their children's children."

- Hacham Ben Zion Abba Shaul Z"L
(b. Jerusalem, 1929 - d. Jerusalem, 1998)



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KITNIYOT

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W W W . J I M E N A . O R G