

Celebrating Middle Eastern Jewish Clothing

Students explore how Jews of the Middle East and North Africa used dress to belong to the cultures around them while keeping a distinct Jewish identity, then celebrate Mimouna

GRADE AND SETTING

Grades 6 to 8: Jewish day schools, congregational schools, and informal Jewish education

TIME

One 75 minute session, or two 45 minute class periods

MATERIALS

Lesson slides
A: Midrash on Jewish Clothing
B: Mimouna Fact Cards

Overview

The Torah calls on the Jewish people to be distinct, yet Jewish communities have always lived among other peoples and absorbed their languages, foods, music, and dress. Jews of the Middle East and North Africa built synagogues that looked like the buildings around them and wore kaftans and robes much like their Muslim neighbors, while keeping Jewish practices that set them apart. At times, distinct dress was also forced on them by law. In this lesson, students analyze images and classic Jewish texts to explore this balance between belonging and distinctiveness, then learn about and celebrate Mimouna, the Moroccan festival at the end of Passover where kaftans, sweets, music, and open doors bring the whole community together.

Essential Questions

1. What can clothing tell us about a person's identity and community?
2. How did Jews of the Middle East and North Africa balance being part of the culture around them with keeping a distinct Jewish identity?
3. Was distinct Jewish dress always a choice? What is the difference between dress a community chooses and dress that is imposed on it?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Define acculturation and assimilation and give an example of each from Jewish history.
2. Use images to identify ways Middle Eastern and North African Jews resembled and differed from their neighbors in architecture and dress.
3. Analyze two classic Jewish texts in chevruta and explain what each says about identity, and how they differ.
4. Explain the history, customs, and values of Mimouna, including hachnasat orchim (welcoming guests) and ties between Jewish and Muslim neighbors.
5. Reflect on how they express their own identity through what they wear and celebrate.

Key Vocabulary

- **Acculturation:** adopting parts of another culture, such as its dress, food, or language, while keeping one's own identity.
- **Assimilation:** blending into another culture so fully that one's original identity fades.
- **Kaftan:** a long robe worn across the Middle East and North Africa by Jews and Muslims alike.
- **Kippah and peyot:** a head covering and the side locks worn by some Jewish men, both outward signs of Jewish identity.
- **Keswa el kbira ("the great dress"):** the richly embroidered bridal gown of Moroccan Jewish women, worn on the eve of the wedding.
- **Dhimmi:** the protected but legally unequal status of Jews and Christians under many Islamic governments.
- **Midrash:** rabbinic interpretation that explains and expands on the Torah.
- **Chevruta:** learning a text in pairs through questions and discussion.
- **Mimouna:** a celebration, rooted in Morocco, held as Passover ends.
- **Mofletta:** a thin pancake spread with butter and honey, the signature food of Mimouna.
- **Hachnasat orchim:** the Jewish value of welcoming guests.

Teacher Background

Belonging and distinctiveness. Jews lived across the Middle East and North Africa for more than 2,500 years. Their daily dress often closely resembled that of their neighbors: robes, kaftans, and headwear made from local fabrics and styles. Synagogues in cities such as Aleppo and Baghdad shared the arches, courtyards, and decorative patterns of the region's architecture. Jewish identity showed in head coverings, side locks, ritual garments, and in clothing reserved for Shabbat, holidays, and weddings. In Morocco, a bride wore the keswa el kbira, an elaborate gown whose velvet and gold embroidery recalls the decoration of a Torah mantle.

When distinct dress was imposed. Distinct dress was not always a choice. Under dhimmi rules, Muslim rulers at times required Jews and Christians to wear distinguishing marks or colors. In 807, Jews in Baghdad were required to wear yellow belts or fringes; in medieval Fez, Jews were ordered to wear black mantles, and later forbidden to wear leather shoes. Students should understand that the same outward difference could be a proud expression of identity or a sign of unequal status, depending on who decided.

About the midrash. A popular saying holds that the Israelites in Egypt kept their names, language, and dress. The earliest rabbinic version (Leviticus Rabbah 32:5) lists names, language, avoiding gossip, and avoiding immorality, but not clothing. Clothing appears in the later midrash Lekach Tov (also called Pesikta Zutarta, 11th century), which says the Israelites' clothing, food, and language were distinct from the Egyptians'. Appendix A presents both texts so students can compare them.

Mimouna. Mimouna is celebrated by Moroccan Jews, and many other North African Jews, on the evening Passover ends. Families open their homes, set tables with symbols of blessing such as flour, milk, honey, dates, nuts, and fish, serve mofletta, wear kaftans and festive dress, and greet one another with *tirbhu u-tis'adu*, "may you prosper and succeed." In many towns, Muslim neighbors brought flour, milk, and butter so Jewish families could bake the first bread after Passover. Explanations of the name vary: some link it to Rabbi Maimon, the father of Maimonides; others to the Arabic word for good fortune or the Hebrew word *emunah*, faith. Moroccan immigrants brought Mimouna to Israel, where it has become a celebration enjoyed by Israelis of every background.

Sources: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Jewish Badge: Origins"; Jewish Encyclopedia, "Fez"; ANU Museum of the Jewish People, Moroccan bridal gown (al-kiswa al-kabira); OU Torah, "The Jews in Egypt Keeping Their Jewish Names, Language and Dress"; Ynetnews, "Mimouna: How a single tradition became Israel's most beloved holiday" (2023); Morocco World News (2024); JIMENA, Sephardic and Mizrahi Passover and Mimouna Guide.

Materials

- [Lesson slides \(PowerPoint\)](#); the notes are aligned with this lesson plan
- [Appendix A: Midrash on Jewish Clothing](#) (one per pair)
- [Appendix B: Mimouna Fact Cards](#) (one set, cut apart)
- Kaftans and festive scarves (contact JIMENA to borrow, or use costume or thrift stores)
- Mimouna sweets such as dates, dried fruit, and honey cookies (check for nut allergies before serving almonds)
- Moroccan music, construction paper, and markers
- Projector and speakers for a short video

Note to teacher: Present the kaftans and the Mimouna table as a living tradition to honor, not a costume. If students in your community have Moroccan or other North African roots, invite them or their families to share their own Mimouna customs, clothing, or recipes; families' traditions vary, and there is no single "right" way to celebrate.

Procedures

Introduction (15 minutes)

- 1 **Post the main questions.** On what occasions did Jews of the Middle East and North Africa wear special clothing? What did it look like, and what did it mean? Is special clothing worn today?
- 2 **Slide 2: Dress around the world.** Ask: Where do you think these people come from? What clues are you using? Introduce the idea that clothing expresses culture and identity.
- 3 **Slide 3: Dress and food.** Ask students to infer each group's origins from their dress and food.
- 4 **Slide 4: Everyday Western dress.** Show people of many backgrounds in everyday Western clothing. Ask: Why is it harder to tell where these people come from? Introduce *acculturation* and *assimilation*, using definitions suited to your students (see [acculturation](#) and [assimilation](#)).
- 5 **Frame the lesson.** Say: "Today we will learn how Jews in Arab and Muslim lands kept their Jewish identity while living within the larger culture around them."

Body of the Lesson, Part 1: Belonging and Distinctiveness (25 minutes)

- 6 **Slide 5: Synagogues in Aleppo and Baghdad.** Say: "Before we look at differences, let's look at similarities." Discuss how these synagogues borrowed from the architecture around them.
- 7 **Slide 6: Iranian Jews and their neighbors.** Students compare the clothing. Ask: What is the same? Define acculturation using this example.
- 8 **Slide 7: What made Jews look different?** Ask: How did Jews look different from their Muslim neighbors? (Head coverings, side locks, ritual garments, and special dress for Shabbat, holidays, and weddings.) Then add the other side: at times rulers required Jews to wear distinguishing colors or marks. Ask: How is chosen difference different from imposed difference?

- 9 **Slide 8: Chevruta study (Appendix A).** In pairs, students read both texts and answer the questions. Bring the class together: Which text includes clothing? Why might the popular version of this teaching, “they kept their names, language, and dress,” have grown over time?

Body of the Lesson, Part 2: Mimouna (25 minutes)

- 10 **Introduce Mimouna.** Explain that Mimouna is celebrated as Passover ends. Families open their homes to everyone, no invitation needed, in the spirit of *hachnasat orchim*. People wear kaftans, eat sweets and mofletta, play music, and bless one another. In many Moroccan towns, Muslim neighbors brought flour, milk, and butter so Jewish families could bake their first bread after Passover.
- 11 **Slide 9: Video (about 2 minutes).** Watch [Shalom Sesame: Moroccan Mimouna](#), in which a young girl in Israel shows how her family celebrates.
- 12 **Learn and teach (Appendix B).** In pairs or small groups, students read one Mimouna Fact Card, choose the two most interesting facts, and make a small poster or drawing to teach the class.
- 13 **Slide 10: Music.** Play Moroccan music while groups work, then each group shares its card.

Conclusion: Celebration and Reflection (10 to 15 minutes)

- 14 **Celebrate Mimouna.** Students put on kaftans, share sweets, and listen to Moroccan music. Teach the greeting *tirbhu u-tis'adu*, “may you prosper and succeed.”
- 15 **Discuss.** Say: “Today we put ourselves in someone else’s shoes: we wore clothing, ate food, and heard music that may be new to us.” Then ask:
- What is the “authentic” clothing of Middle Eastern Jews: what their ancestors wore in ancient Israel, or what they wore after centuries in Arab and Muslim lands?
 - If the midrash says the Israelites kept their clothing, what clothing might it mean?
 - Should Jews today wear clothing that sets them apart? When do you show your identity through what you wear?
 - How did this celebration feel? What did you learn, and what questions do you have?
- 16 **Exit ticket.** Students write two sentences: one way Middle Eastern and North African Jews belonged to the culture around them, and one way they stayed distinct.

Assessment

- **Formative:** responses to the image questions; chevruta answers on Appendix A; the Mimouna Fact Card presentation.
- **Summative:** the exit ticket. A strong answer gives an accurate example of acculturation (such as dress or architecture) and an accurate example of distinct Jewish identity (such as head coverings, holiday dress, or Mimouna).

Differentiation

- **Younger students or English learners:** preteach the vocabulary with images; read Appendix A aloud; use sentence frames (“Jews looked like their neighbors because _____. They looked different because _____”).
- **Students who need support:** pair with a strong reader for the chevruta; assign a shorter fact card; allow a drawing in place of written answers.
- **Advanced learners:** research the keswa el kbira and explain how its design reflects Spanish, Moroccan, and Jewish influences; or compare the two midrash texts in Hebrew.

Extension Activities

- **Family dress interview.** Students ask a family member about clothing worn for a holiday, wedding, or Shabbat in their family and share a photograph.
- **Bridal traditions.** Explore the Moroccan keswa el kbira at the [ANU Museum of the Jewish People](#) and connect it to JIMENA's [Henna Party](#) lesson.
- **Around the Jewish world.** Compare holiday dress in Morocco, Yemen, Iraq, and Iran, or teach JIMENA's [Around the Middle Eastern Jewish World](#) lesson.
- **Host a class or family Mimouna.** Use JIMENA's [Sephardic and Mizrahi Passover and Mimouna Guide](#) to plan the table and recipes.

Resources and External Links

- [JIMENA: Sephardic and Mizrahi Passover and Mimouna Guide](#)
s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/tf-jimena-prd/pdfs/Mimouna-compactado.pdf
- [JIMENA: Morocco, Cultural Heritage](#)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/morocco
- [Shalom Sesame: Moroccan Mimuna \(video\)](#)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=24FC9_VCIgE
- [Mimouna: A Delicious Way to Celebrate the End of Passover \(My Jewish Learning\)](#)
www.myjewishlearning.com/the-nosher/mimouna-a-delicious-way-to-celebrate-the-end-of-passover/
- [Mimouna: How a Single Tradition Became Israel's Most Beloved Holiday \(Ynetnews\)](#)
www.ynetnews.com/jewish-world/article/by6qq11efn
- [Mimouna Still Unites Jews and Muslims in Morocco \(Morocco World News\)](#)
www.moroccoworldnews.com/2024/04/20190/in-shadow-of-gaza-war-mimouna-still-unites-jews-and-muslims-in-morocco/
- [Bridal Gown, al-Kiswa al-Kabira, "the Great Dress" \(ANU Museum of the Jewish People\)](#)
index.anumuseum.org.il/?p=24964
- [Jewish Badge: Origins \(United States Holocaust Memorial Museum\)](#)
encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/jewish-badge-origins
- [The Jews in Egypt Keeping Their Jewish Names, Language and Dress \(OU Torah\)](#)
outorah.org/p/209177