

Henna Party

Students discover the henna celebration, a joyful pre-wedding tradition of Moroccan, Yemenite, and other Middle Eastern Jewish communities, and explore its meanings of blessing, protection, and community

GRADE AND SETTING

Grades 6 to 8: public, independent, and Jewish schools; adaptable for grades 3 to 5

TIME

One 60 minute session, or two 45 minute class periods

APPENDICES

A: Henna Party Invitation
B: Henna Around the World

Overview

Every community has ways to celebrate life's happiest moments. For many Jews from Morocco, Yemen, Libya, Iraq, Kurdistan, India, and other parts of the Middle East and North Africa, a wedding begins with a *henna* (also called *hinna* or *hina*), a festive gathering where family and friends dress in traditional clothing, sing and dance, share sweets, and decorate the hands of the bride and groom with henna paste as a blessing for joy, good fortune, and protection. Similar henna traditions are shared by Muslim, Hindu, Amazigh, and other communities across North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. In this lesson, students learn about the henna plant and its place in the Bible, watch henna celebrations, explore the meaning of each part of the ceremony, compare henna traditions across cultures, and hold their own respectful classroom celebration.

Essential Questions

1. What is a henna celebration, and why do many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews celebrate it?
2. What values and hopes do the parts of the ceremony express?
3. How do communities share, adapt, and make traditions their own?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Describe the henna celebration of Moroccan, Yemenite, and other Middle Eastern Jewish communities and when it takes place.
2. Explain the meaning of the main elements of the ceremony: henna, clothing, music, sweets, and blessings.
3. Connect the henna plant to its mention in the Song of Songs.
4. Compare Jewish henna traditions with henna traditions in other cultures.
5. Reflect on how their own families celebrate happy occasions.

Curriculum Connections

- **Social Studies (C3 Framework):** D2.Geo.6.6-8 (how cultural and environmental characteristics shape places); D2.His.4.6-8 (perspectives across cultures).
- **English Language Arts (Common Core):** SL.6.1 (collaborative discussion); W.6.3 (narrative reflection).
- **Science (optional):** how a plant pigment (lawsone) stains skin.
- **Jewish Studies (Jewish settings):** Jewish wedding customs; Song of Songs; Sephardic and Mizrahi heritage.

Key Vocabulary

- **Henna:** a natural dye made from the dried leaves of the henna plant (*Lawsonia inermis*), used to decorate skin and hair.
- **Henna celebration** (*hinna*, *hina*): a festive gathering, usually a few days before a wedding, where henna is applied to the bride and groom.
- **Kofer** (כִּפּוּר): the Biblical Hebrew word for henna.
- **Kaftan:** a long, flowing robe; in Morocco, brides often wear the richly embroidered *keswa el kbira*, the “grand dress.”
- **Tishbuk lulu:** the ornate pearl and silver headdress of a bride from Sana’a, Yemen.
- **Ululation:** a high, trilling cry of joy made at celebrations across the Middle East and North Africa.

Teacher Background

Henna has been used for thousands of years in hot, dry regions from North Africa to South Asia. Its leaves contain a natural pigment, lawsone, that leaves a reddish brown stain on skin, nails, and hair. In the Middle East and North Africa, henna came to symbolize joy, fertility, and protection, and it became part of celebrations shared by Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike.

For many Jewish communities of the region, the henna celebration was held on the eve of the wedding. Customs varied: Moroccan brides wore the embroidered *keswa el kbira*; Yemenite brides from Sana’a wore the towering *tishbuk lulu* headdress and layers of jewelry; women sang special songs, ululated, and danced; and the henna, often placed on a tray decorated with candles and sweets, was applied to the palms of the bride and groom and sometimes to the guests as a wish for good luck. Many families believed henna protected the couple from the evil eye. Today, many Sephardic and Mizrahi families in Israel and around the world hold a henna party a few days before the wedding, sometimes with the same customs and sometimes with new ones.

Henna appears in the Bible. The Song of Songs compares a beloved to “a cluster of henna blossoms in the vineyards of Ein Gedi” (1:14), using the Hebrew word *kofer*. The medieval commentator Rashi read the verse as a symbol of God’s many acts of forgiveness for Israel, which some explain as a wish that a new couple begin with a clean slate.

Sources: My Jewish Learning, “Embracing a Jewish Henna Wedding Tradition”; Song of Songs 1:14 and Rashi’s commentary (Sefaria); U.S. Food and Drug Administration, “Temporary Tattoos, Henna/Mehndi, and ‘Black Henna’: Fact Sheet.”

Safety and sensitivity: Use only natural henna or nontoxic henna style markers, and get family permission before applying anything to skin. Never use “black henna,” which often contains a chemical (PPD) that can cause serious skin reactions, as the FDA warns. Test a small spot first, or let students

decorate paper hands instead. Present clothing as real garments with meaning, not costumes, and invite, but never require, students to share their own family traditions.

Materials

- Projector and speakers
- Videos: [What Is a Henna Ceremony?](#) (My Jewish Learning, 1 min) and [Why Are Sephardi and Ashkenazi Weddings So Unique?](#) (Unpacked, 8 min); optional: [A Moroccan Jewish henna party](#) (5.5 min)
- Song: ["Ahlan wa Sahlan," performed by Sfatayim](#) (a traditional Moroccan song of welcome)
- Optional: scarves, kaftans, or other festive clothing; a large tray with candles (battery operated) and sweets such as dates or marzipan
- Natural henna paste or nontoxic henna style markers, or paper hand outlines
- Handouts:
 - [Appendix A: Henna Party Invitation](#) (one per student)
 - [Appendix B: Henna Around the World](#) (one per student)

Procedures

Introduction: How Do We Celebrate? (10 minutes)

- 1 **Main questions.** Write the essential questions on the board.
- 2 **Circle share.** Ask: How does your family celebrate a happy occasion, such as a birthday, wedding, holiday, or graduation? Students may mention music, dancing, special foods, clothing, or blessings.
- 3 **Introduce.** Explain that in many Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa, a wedding begins with a henna celebration. Ask: What do you already know about henna?

Body of the Lesson: Inside a Henna Celebration (25 minutes)

- 4 **Watch (10 min).** Show the My Jewish Learning video, then the henna section of the Unpacked video (or the optional Moroccan henna party). Students list everything they notice: clothing, music, food, the henna tray, dancing, and blessings.
- 5 **Read the invitation (10 min).** Hand out Appendix A. In small groups, students read one section each (the henna plant, the Bible, clothing, protection, music, sweets) and teach it to their group. Discuss: What hopes for the couple does each part of the celebration express?
- 6 **Sing (5 min).** Play "Ahlan wa Sahlan," a traditional Moroccan song whose title means "welcome." Play it twice so students can clap and join in the refrain.

Conclusion: Our Henna Celebration (25 minutes)

- 7 **Celebrate (15 min).** Hold the celebration to mark something happy in your class, such as finishing a unit or a birthday. Two volunteers carry the tray of sweets around the room while classmates clap and sing. Students who have permission receive a small henna or marker design on their palm; others decorate a paper hand. Students may wish one another blessings for health and happiness.
- 8 **Compare and reflect (10 min).** Using Appendix B, students compare Jewish henna traditions with henna traditions in other cultures and complete the reflection: What surprised you? How is this celebration like or unlike celebrations in your family? What would you like to learn more about?

Assessment

- **Formative:** observation lists from the videos, the group teaching of Appendix A, and participation.
- **Summative:** the Appendix B reflection. A strong response explains at least two elements of the ceremony and their meanings, makes one accurate cross cultural comparison, and connects to the student's own experience.

Differentiation

- **Younger students:** focus on the celebration and paper hand designs; read the invitation aloud together.
- **Students who need support:** assign one section of Appendix A with a partner; provide sentence frames.
- **Advanced learners:** research how henna customs differ among Moroccan, Yemenite, Kurdish, and Indian Jewish communities, or explain the chemistry of how lawsone stains skin.

Extension Activities

- **Clothing and celebration.** Continue with JIMENA's [Celebrating Middle Eastern Jewish Clothing](#) lesson, which explores bridal dress and the Mimouna.
- **The hamsa.** Henna is sometimes used to draw a hamsa for protection. Explore the symbol in JIMENA's [Open Your Hand! Hamsa](#) lesson.
- **Family celebrations.** Students interview a family member about a celebration tradition and share a photo or object in JIMENA's [All-Inclusive Heritage Museum](#) lesson.

Resources and External Links

- [Embracing a Jewish Henna Wedding Tradition \(My Jewish Learning\)](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/jewish-and/embracing-a-jewish-henna-wedding-tradition/)
www.myjewishlearning.com/jewish-and/embracing-a-jewish-henna-wedding-tradition/
- [What Is a Henna Ceremony? \(My Jewish Learning, video\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-LMvPUY-k)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-LMvPUY-k
- [Why Are Sephardi and Ashkenazi Weddings So Unique? \(Unpacked, video\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogOXIJFnT2s)
www.youtube.com/watch?v=ogOXIJFnT2s
- [Song of Songs 1:14 \(Sefaria\)](http://www.sefaria.org/Song_of_Songs.1.14)
www.sefaria.org/Song_of_Songs.1.14
- [Rashi on Song of Songs 1:14 \(Sefaria\)](http://www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Song_of_Songs.1.14)
www.sefaria.org/Rashi_on_Song_of_Songs.1.14
- [Temporary Tattoos, Henna/Mehndi, and "Black Henna": Fact Sheet \(U.S. Food and Drug Administration\)](http://www.fda.gov/cosmetics/cosmetic-products/temporary-tattoos-hennamehndi-and-black-henna-fact-sheet)
www.fda.gov/cosmetics/cosmetic-products/temporary-tattoos-hennamehndi-and-black-henna-fact-sheet
- [JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Morocco](http://qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/morocco)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/morocco
- [JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Yemen](http://qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/yemen)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/yemen
- [Arts and Music \(Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit\)](http://www.sepharditoolkit.org/recommendation/arts-and-music-education/)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/recommendation/arts-and-music-education/
- [Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit \(JIMENA\)](http://www.sepharditoolkit.org/)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/