

LIFECYCLE AND CUSTOMS

Welcoming a Child

From Zeved HaBat, the “gift of the daughter,” to Elijah’s chair and names that honor living grandparents: how Sephardic and Mizrahi families greet a new baby.

FOR GIRLS

Zeved HaBat, “gift of the daughter,” a naming celebration with blessings and songs. Ottoman Sephardim called it *las fadas* or *la fijola*.

FOR BOYS

The Brit Milah on the eighth day, when a boy is welcomed into the covenant of Abraham and receives his name.

NAMES

Many Sephardic and Mizrahi families name children after grandparents, including grandparents who are still living.

PROTECTION

Folk customs such as amulets, rue, and nightly gatherings of song were meant to protect mother and baby.

Across the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sephardic communities of the Ottoman Empire, the birth of a baby was a celebration for the whole extended family. Relatives gathered at home to sing, bless the newborn, and share sweets. Customs differed from city to city, and many were passed down orally by mothers and grandmothers. Some, like the Sephardic naming ceremony for girls, are centuries old, much older than the newer welcoming ceremonies for daughters that began in other Jewish communities in the 1970s.

Welcoming a daughter

The ceremony for girls is called **Zeved HaBat**, “gift of the daughter.” The name echoes the words of Leah in Genesis 30:20 after the birth of her son Zevulun: God has given me a good gift. It is practiced in Sephardic, Middle Eastern, North African, and Italian communities.

- **At home.** Among Ottoman Sephardim the ceremony was usually held at home in the weeks after the birth (in some communities, around the thirtieth day). Relatives sang, offered blessings, and announced the baby’s name, followed by a spread of Sephardic delicacies and flowers. Prayer books show it was practiced by at least the seventeenth century.
- **In the synagogue.** In the Syrian Jewish community of Brooklyn, the father, his father, and his father in law are called to the Torah on the first Shabbat after the birth. The rabbi recites a blessing for the girl, and the congregation sings songs called *pizmonim*.
- **A blessing with heroines.** At the *fijola*, the blessing said before the name is announced mentions matriarchs and heroines such as Miriam and Queen Esther.

The dove in the cleft of the rock

Before the baby’s name is announced, families sing verses from the Song of Songs. Song of Songs 2:14 speaks of a dove in the clefts of the rock, often understood as a picture of the baby joining the community. When she is the family’s first child, they add 6:9, which calls the dove her mother’s only one. The verses are sung in Hebrew and sometimes in Ladino.

Welcoming a son

The **Brit Milah**, or covenant of circumcision, takes place when a boy is eight days old, following the commandment to Abraham in Genesis 17. A trained specialist called a *mohel* performs it, the baby receives his Hebrew name, and a festive meal follows. Sephardic and Mizrahi families surround the ceremony with customs of their own:

- **Elijah's chair.** A special chair, the *Kise Eliyahu*, is set aside for the prophet Elijah, remembered in Jewish tradition as a witness at every Brit Milah and a protector of children. Chairs were often finely carved or covered in rich fabric; a carved chair from Fez, Morocco, dated 1903, is in the collection of ANU Museum of the Jewish People.
- **Honored roles.** The *sandak* holds the baby. In many Sephardic families, the father's parents are honored at the first son's ceremony and the mother's parents at the next.
- **The night before.** Men of the family and community gather to read passages of the Zohar, a classic work of Jewish mysticism. This evening is called "Zohar" or *Brit Yitzhak*, "covenant of Isaac," and ends with sweets and words of Torah.

Customs of protection

Newborns and mothers were thought to be especially vulnerable to the evil eye and to harmful spirits, such as Lilith in Jewish folklore. Ottoman Sephardic families pinned paper amulets to mother and baby, and placed rue, a fragrant herb, beside the baby. In Morocco, relatives gathered each night from the birth until the Brit Milah for the *Tahdid*, reading Psalms, singing, and waving a sword to drive away evil spirits.

Community by community

Ottoman Sephardim (Turkey, Greece, the Balkans)

The girls' ceremony was called *las fadas*, "the fairies," a name borrowed in medieval Spain from Christian neighbors, or *la fijola*, from *hija*, "daughter." Guests took turns holding the baby. In Turkey, an embroidered silk veil covered mother and daughter until the naming, and was saved for the girl's wedding.

Sources: University of Washington; My Jewish Learning

Seattle (Sephardic America)

Immigrants from the Ottoman Empire brought these customs to Seattle. A 1950 home movie shows the *fijola* of Marlene and Charlene Souriano. In the old country, women also held a *kortar fashadura*, "cutting the swaddling cloth," sewing the baby's clothes while singing Ladino songs.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

Salonica (Thessaloniki)

Scribes wrote protective amulets called *kame'ot*, folded into small triangles. Some people carried theirs from birth into adulthood, sewn shut and worn on a string.

Source: University of Washington

Syria

A special decorated curtain honors Elijah. At a Brit Milah, guests add gifts to a tiered tray of flowers and candles, which is then auctioned for charity.

Sources: Chabad.org; My Jewish Learning

Morocco

Elijah's chair is brought from the synagogue to the home the night before and decorated with colorful fabric. Guests smell dried rose petals during the blessings, and a dish of sand is set near the mohel.

Sources: Chabad.org; ANU Museum of the Jewish People

Iran

Persian Jewish families have a custom of setting out a large tray of apples at the Brit Milah.

Source: Chabad.org

Yemen

Babies were welcomed on the first Simchat Torah after their birth, carried by a father or grandfather in the joyful Torah procession. Families also used folk protections such as salt in the baby's carriage.

Source: My Jewish Learning

India

Jewish families in India welcomed a daughter by decorating the home with flower blossoms floating in water.

Source: My Jewish Learning

What's in a name?

Honoring the living. Many Ashkenazi Jews name a baby after a relative who has died. Sephardic and Mizrahi families usually name children after grandparents, whether living or not, and many grandparents look forward to the honor. A common order was: the first son after the father's father, the first daughter after the father's mother, the next son and daughter after the mother's parents.

Pidyon HaBen. On the 31st day after birth, a family whose first child is a son may hold the "redemption of the firstborn." The father gives five silver coins to a *kohen*, a descendant of the ancient priests, followed by blessings and a festive meal. In Ottoman Sephardic homes, fragrant rue might appear here too.

Common misconceptions

- **"Ceremonies for girls are new."** Sephardic families have held Zeved HaBat for centuries.
- **"Jews never name a baby after a living person."** That is an Ashkenazi custom. Many Sephardic and Mizrahi families do the opposite.
- **"A home ceremony is less important."** Among Ottoman Sephardim, the home was the usual setting for welcoming a daughter.
- **"Every family follows the same customs."** Practices vary by community and by family.

Words to know

Zeved HaBat *Hebrew*

"Gift of the daughter," the naming celebration for a baby girl.

Las fadas *Judeo Spanish (Ladino)*

"The fairies," an older Sephardic name for the girls' ceremony.

La fijola *Judeo Spanish (Ladino)*

From *hija*, "daughter"; the girls' naming among Ottoman Sephardim.

Brit Milah *Hebrew*

"Covenant of circumcision," held for a boy on his eighth day.

Kise Eliyahu *Hebrew*

"Elijah's chair," set aside for the prophet at a Brit Milah.

Sandak *Hebrew*

The honored person who holds the baby during the Brit Milah.

Tahdid *Moroccan Judeo Arabic*

Nightly protective gatherings from the birth until the Brit Milah.

Kame'a (plural kame'ot) *Hebrew*

A protective amulet.

Kortar fashadura *Judeo Spanish (Ladino)*

"Cutting the swaddling cloth," a women's gathering to sew the baby's clothes.

Pidyon HaBen *Hebrew*

"Redemption of the son," for a firstborn son on his 31st day.

Bringing these customs to life

In the public school classroom

- Teach how cultures around the world welcome babies, and compare with customs such as the Islamic *aqiqah* feast held seven days after a birth.
- Explore names: students can research the meaning and story of their own name, with family permission and without pressure to share.
- Watch the 1950 Souriano home movie and discuss what it shows about immigrant family life in Seattle.
- Describe ceremonies; do not reenact them or have students sing the blessings. Mention circumcision briefly and factually, as a religious practice, in age appropriate terms.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Hold a Zeved HaBat for a new baby girl, with Song of Songs 2:14 and a Ladino song.
- Display an image of Elijah's chair and invite families to bring naming photos.
- Study Genesis 30:20 and Song of Songs 2:14 and 6:9 with older students.
- Explore the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for heritage across the school year.

At home and with family

- Ask: Who was I named for? Was that person alive when I was born?
- Find out how your family welcomed babies. Is there a special blanket, veil, or amulet?
- Label baby and naming photos with names, places, and dates.
- Record an elder's memories and share them with JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why do you think so many cultures hold a celebration soon after a baby is born?
- What might it mean to a grandparent to have a grandchild named after them while they are alive?
- Why might customs that were practiced at home fade faster after families move to a new country?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Fijola of Marlene and Charlene Souriano, Seattle, 1950 (University of Washington Stroum Center, home movie)
youtube.com/watch?v=j5kWRAREMYw

Culture and Holidays video collection (JIMENA)
jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Read

***Celebrating Your New Jewish Daughter*, by Debra Nussbaum Cohen** (Turner Publishing, 2012 edition). Includes Sephardic traditions.
youscribe.loungeup.com/catalogue/ebooks/savoirs/religions/celebrating-your-new-jewish-daughter-3392990

***Traditions and Customs of the Sephardic Jews of Salonica*, by Michael Molho** (English edition, 1994). Cited in the UW exhibit. For teachers.
jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs/kameot-a-mulets-for-newborn-babies

***Ritual Medical Lore of Sephardic Women*, by Isaac Jack Levy and Rosemary Zumwalt** (2001, as cited in the UW exhibit). For teachers.
jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs/kameot-a-mulets-for-newborn-babies

From JIMENA

Oral history collection
jimena.org/oral-history

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)
sepharditoolkit.org

Share your family's story
jimena.org/share-your-story

Explore online

Exploring Sephardic Life Cycle Customs (University of Washington online exhibit)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs

La Fijola: Naming Baby Girls at Home (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/la-fijola-baby-naming-ceremony-girls-home

Berit Mila: Sephardic Circumcision Ceremony (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs/berit-mila-sephardic-circumcision-ceremony

Kortar Fashadura: Sephardic Baby Shower (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs/kortar-fashadura-sephardic-baby-shower

Historic Rituals for Welcoming Jewish Daughters (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/welcoming-jewish-daughters

What's in a Jewish Name? (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/naming-children

Additional Sephardic Circumcision Customs (Chabad.org)
chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/144126/jewish/Additional-Sephardic-Circumcision-Customs.htm

Chair of Elijah the Prophet, Fez, 1903 (ANU Museum of the Jewish People)
index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/out-of-exhibition-artifact-kisei-eliyahu-ha-navi-chair-of-elijah-the-prophet-used-in-circumcisions

Sword Shaped Amulet to Protect a Newborn, Marrakesh (ANU Museum of the Jewish People)
index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/out-of-exhibition-artifact-sword-shaped-amulet-to-protect-a-newborn-child

Naming Traditions (JewishGen)
jewishgen.org/InfoFiles/GivenNames/slide7.html



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include the University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies exhibit *Exploring Sephardic Life Cycle Customs*; My Jewish Learning (Debra Nussbaum Cohen; David Novak); Chabad.org; ANU Museum of the Jewish People; Jewish Heritage Online Magazine; JewishGen; Sefaria; and Sephardic U. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.