

LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND THOUGHT

Classical Sephardic Judaism

Torah joined with philosophy, poetry, science, and medicine: a thousand year tradition of Jewish learning, and an approach to Jewish law many see as practical, moderate, and inclusive.

WHAT IT IS

A name some rabbis and educators use for what they see as the intellectual and religious heritage of Sephardic and Mizrahi sages.

ROOTS

The Golden Age of Jewish life in Muslim Spain (al Andalus), building on earlier scholars in Baghdad.

KEY IDEAS

As advocates describe it: Torah study alongside worldly knowledge, Jewish law applied with an eye to real lives, and one community that embraces every Jew.

A DEBATE

Supporters see a distinct tradition. Some scholars caution against romanticizing it or drawing sharp lines between communities.

A thousand years ago, Jewish thinkers in Baghdad, Córdoba, Granada, and Cairo wrote Hebrew poetry, studied philosophy and medicine, and composed some of the most important works of Jewish law ever written. Later sages in Safed, Baghdad, and Jerusalem carried this heritage forward. Today, some rabbis and educators, among them Rabbi Marc D. Angel and Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, call this inheritance “classical Sephardic Judaism” and point to it as a model of learning that is open to the world, grounded in Jewish law, and welcoming to the whole Jewish people.

Torah and the wisdom of the world

The Golden Age. Under Muslim rule, Jews of the Middle East and Spain lived within a flourishing Arabic speaking civilization. Jewish scholars wrote philosophy and science in Arabic (often in Hebrew letters) and Torah commentary and poetry in Hebrew. Hebrew poets in Spain borrowed Arabic meters and themes, such as wine, love, and nature, and wove them together with the language of the Bible. Many sages were also physicians, statesmen, and scientists.

A guiding idea. Maimonides taught that one should “hear the truth from whoever utters it,” and that the study of nature and the cosmos is itself a path to knowing God. Scholar Zvi Zohar describes a lasting Sephardic ideal of joining Jewish learning with broader human knowledge, including science, philosophy, and the arts.

Law for real life. In this view, later Sephardic and Mizrahi rabbis were known for rulings that weighed the needs of the community and the dignity of each person, and for treating Jews of every level of observance as full members of one community. Their communities generally did not divide into separate denominations. To learn more

One view among several

“Classical Sephardic Judaism” is a modern label, and scholars debate how distinct the tradition really is. Professor Zvi Zohar of the Shalom Hartman Institute finds that nineteenth and twentieth century Sephardic rabbis ruled noticeably differently from their Ashkenazi counterparts, while noting that the contrast may reflect how each community met modernity. Dr. Ariel Picard has warned against a “romanticized view” of Sephardic rabbis and against sharp Sephardic versus Ashkenazi divisions. Customs also varied widely from Morocco to Iraq to Turkey, so no single description fits every community.

about how this shapes Jewish identity today, see the companion explainer on Masorti Judaism in this series.

Key figures and ideas

Saadia Gaon (882 to 942)

Born in Egypt, Saadia moved to Babylonia and led the great academy of Sura. He translated much of the Bible into Arabic and wrote *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (935), which sought to show that reason and revelation agree.

Sources: Britannica; My Jewish Learning

Shmuel HaNagid (993 to 1055 or 1056)

Born in Córdoba, he rose to become vizier of the Muslim kingdom of Granada, directing its diplomacy and armies, while also serving as *nagid*, head of its Jewish community. He was a Talmud scholar and a pioneering Hebrew poet who even wrote poems about war.

Sources: Britannica; Jewish Virtual Library

Shlomo Ibn Gabirol (born about 1022)

A poet of both sacred and secular verse, and a philosopher in the Neoplatonic tradition. Christian scholars in Europe knew his philosophy in Latin under the name "Avicbron."

Source: Britannica

Yehuda HaLevi (about 1075 to 1141)

Physician, philosopher, and one of the greatest Hebrew poets. His *Kuzari*, written in Arabic, is a dialogue between a Jewish sage and the king of the Khazars. His "Songs of Zion," still read on Tisha B'Av, voice his longing for the Land of Israel. Late in life he left Spain for the Holy Land. He is thought to have died soon after, though legend says he reached Jerusalem.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Sefaria

Maimonides, the Rambam (1138 to 1204)

Born in Córdoba, his family fled persecution under the Almohads, living in Fez and the Land of Israel before settling in Fustat (Old Cairo). He served as a physician to the royal court and wrote a commentary on the Mishnah in Arabic, the *Mishneh Torah*, a complete code of Jewish law in Hebrew, and the *Guide of the Perplexed*, on Torah, science, and philosophy.

Source: My Jewish Learning

Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488 to 1575)

Expelled from Spain as a small child, Karo grew up in the Ottoman Empire and settled in Safed in the 1530s, a center of Jewish mysticism. There he completed the *Shulhan Arukh*, "the Set Table," a code of practical Jewish law. From 1569 it was printed with the Ashkenazi glosses of Rabbi Moshe Isserles on the same page, and together they became a foundational code for observant Jews.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, Distinctions

The Ben Ish Hai (1835 to 1909)

Rabbi Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad combined practical law with mystical teaching in his sermons, and he wrote a guide to Jewish law for women in Judeo Arabic. His authority reached Iraq, India, Persia, and the Land of Israel. Educator Tamar Zaken highlights his ruling that even used clothing can merit a blessing of joy, protecting the dignity of the poor.

Sources: Posen Library; Tamar Zaken, Distinctions

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (1920 to 2013)

Born in Baghdad, he came to Jerusalem at age four and served as Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1973 to 1983. Known for generally lenient rulings, he recognized Ethiopia's Beta Israel as Jews and freed about 1,000 women whose husbands went missing in the 1973 war to remarry. He was also the spiritual leader of the Shas political party, and his efforts to unify Sephardic practice sometimes set aside local customs.

Sources: ANU Museum of the Jewish People; Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, Jewish Journal

Modern voices

Rabbi Marc D. Angel, rabbi emeritus of Congregation Shearith Israel, the historic Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York, founded the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals in 2007. He describes classical Sephardic Judaism as intellectually vibrant, compassionate, and inclusive. He urges rabbis to begin with the real human situation, then turn to the classical texts, and to see all Jews as one family whatever their level of observance.

Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, of the Sephardic Educational Center, teaches the legal and philosophical writings of classic Sephardic rabbis. He points to the page of the *Shulhan Arukh*, where Karo's Sephardic rulings and Isserles's Ashkenazi notes sit side by side, as a model for schools: teach both traditions together, every day, as the shared heritage of all Jews.

Common misconceptions

- **"Sephardic Judaism is a separate denomination."** It is a heritage and approach, not a movement. Sephardic and Ashkenazi prayer books are largely the same, and the rabbis share the same Talmud and codes.
- **"Moderate means less committed."** Classical Sephardic rabbis were fully committed to Jewish law. Their flexibility came from within it.
- **"The Golden Age was a time of perfect harmony."** It produced remarkable cooperation and creativity, but there were also persecutions, such as the one Maimonides' family fled.
- **"Only Sephardic Jews follow these sages."** Maimonides and the *Shulhan Arukh* are studied by Jews everywhere.

Words to know

Halakha *Hebrew*

Jewish law, as studied and applied in daily life.

Minhag *Hebrew*

A custom, often specific to a community or family.

Al Andalus *Arabic*

The Muslim ruled parts of the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal).

Gaon *Hebrew*

Title of the heads of the great Babylonian academies.

Nagid *Hebrew*

"Chief," the head of a Jewish community in Muslim lands.

Shulhan Arukh *Hebrew*

"The Set Table," Rabbi Yosef Karo's code of Jewish law.

Mappah *Hebrew*

"Tablecloth," Rabbi Moshe Isserles's Ashkenazi notes to the *Shulhan Arukh*.

Rambam *Hebrew*

A name for Maimonides, from the initials of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon.

Responsa *Hebrew she'elot u'teshuvot*

Written answers by rabbis to questions of Jewish law.

Hakham *Hebrew*

"Sage," a traditional Sephardic title for a rabbi.

Bringing the tradition to life

In the public school classroom

- Teach al Andalus as a meeting place of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian learning and compare Jewish, Muslim, and Christian thinkers of the era.
- Read Yehuda HaLevi's poetry in translation as literature, alongside Arabic poetry from the same era.
- Explore Maimonides as a figure in the history of medicine and science.
- Present the sages' ideas as subjects of study; do not ask students to perform rituals or recite prayers.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Build a classroom "library of sages" using the reading list in Tamar Zaken's Distinctions article.
- Study a page of the *Shulhan Arukh* with Karo and Isserles side by side, as Rabbi Bouskila suggests.
- Use the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit to weave Sephardic thinkers into the whole year.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives which rabbis and customs your family followed, and why.
- Look for family books, such as a *Ben Ish Hai* or a prayer book from the old country, and record their stories.
- Share a family memory with JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Can a religious tradition be both firmly committed to its laws and open to new knowledge? What examples from this explainer support your answer?
- Why might a community choose to stay united rather than divide into separate movements? What are the benefits and challenges?
- Why do scholars disagree about how distinct this tradition is? How can we honor a heritage without romanticizing it?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Sephardic Spiritual Response to Contemporary Issues Facing Our Youth, with Rabbi Daniel Bouskila (JIMENA, 2019)

vimeo.com/356520559

Classes and Education video collection (JIMENA)

jimena.org/videos/classes-and-education

Read

Voices in Exile: A Study in Sephardic Intellectual History, by Marc D. Angel (KTAV with Sephardic House, 1991).

jewishbookcouncil.org/book/voices-in-exile-study-in-sephardic-intellectual-history

Foundations of Sephardic Spirituality, by Marc D. Angel (Jewish Lights, 2006). The inner life of Ottoman Sephardic Jews.

publishersweekly.com/9781580232432

Rabbinic Creativity in the Modern Middle East, by Zvi Zohar (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). Scholarly.

jewishbookcouncil.org/book/rabbinic-creativity-in-the-modern-middle-east

The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, translated by Peter Cole (Princeton University Press, 2007).

english.yale.edu/node/5834

Maimonides: Life and Thought, by Moshe Halbertal (Princeton University Press, 2014).

cris.huji.ac.il/en/publications/maimonides-life-and-thought-2

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"A Library of Sages," by Tamar Zaken Bringing Sephardic rabbis' books and values to day schools.

distinctionsjournal.org/a-library-of-sages-bringing-sephardi-wisdom-to-jewish-day-schools-2

"Residents and Strangers," by Elana Riback Rand Why all Modern Orthodox schools should teach Sephardic heritage.

distinctionsjournal.org/residents-and-strangers-sephardi-education-and-the-future-of-american-modern-orthodoxy

"Sephardic Resilience, Sephardic Zionism," by Rabbi Daniel Bouskila Rabbi Yosef Karo's journey from Spain to Safed.

distinctionsjournal.org/sephardic-resilience-sephardic-zionism-born-in-1492-still-going-strong

"The Poetry of Exile and Return," by Sarah Sassoon Yehuda HaLevi and the poets of Spain.

distinctionsjournal.org/the-poetry-of-exile-and-return

Explore online

Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (founded by Rabbi Marc D. Angel)

jewishideas.org/about-us

Battling for the Soul of Orthodoxy: The Essential Teachings of Rabbi Marc D. Angel (Rabbi Hayyim Angel)

jewishideas.org/article/battling-soul-orthodoxy-essential-teachings-rabbi-marc-d-angel

Sephardic Reflections: Present and Future (Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, *Conversations*)

jewishideas.org/print/pdf/node/3172

Sephardic Torah from the Holy Land (Rabbi Bouskila's column, *Jewish Journal*)

jewishjournal.com/author/rabbibouskila

Sephardic Halachic Rulings: From Moderation and Inclusion to Extremism and Separatism? (Shalom Hartman Institute)

hartman.org.il/sephardic-halachic-rulings-from-moderation-and-inclusion-to-extremism-and-separatism

Who Was Maimonides? (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/who-was-maimonides

Judah (Yehuda) Halevi (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/judah-halevi

Ben Ish Hai (Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization)

posenlibrary.com/node/8107

From JIMENA

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

sepharditoolkit.org

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States: national study

sephardicstudy.org

JIMENA Oral History

jimena.org/oral-history



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 My Jewish Learning; Britannica; Sefaria; Jewish Virtual Library; Posen Library; ANU Museum of the Jewish People; Shalom Hartman Institute; Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals; Jewish Journal; and Distinctions. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.