

LIFECYCLE AND CUSTOMS

Dress and Jewelry

Velvet and gold thread, silver filigree, and silk ikat: how Jewish families from Morocco to Bukhara dressed, and the artisans who made it all.

WHAT IT IS

The everyday and festive clothing, headdresses, and jewelry worn by Jews across North Africa, the Middle East, the Ottoman lands, Iran, and Central Asia.

SHARED STYLE

Jews mostly dressed like their neighbors, with small details of color, cut, or headdress that sometimes set them apart.

MAKERS

Jewish silversmiths, embroiderers, dyers, and tailors were important artisans in many local economies.

TODAY

Museums in Jerusalem, New York, Berkeley, and beyond preserve these garments, and families revive them at weddings and celebrations.

Clothing tells a story. A velvet dress from Fez, a silver necklace from Sana'a, or a silk coat from Bukhara can tell us where a family lived, what they celebrated, whether a woman was married, and how much a household owned. Curators at the Israel Museum, home to the world's largest collection of Jewish dress, note that Jews across the region usually wore clothes much like those of their Muslim and Christian neighbors, with a few special touches of their own. This explainer looks beyond the wedding day (see our Henna and Weddings explainers) to everyday and festive dress, jewelry, and the Jewish artisans who made them.

Dressing like neighbors, and sometimes apart

A shared wardrobe. In Baghdad, Istanbul, or a village in the Atlas Mountains, Jewish clothing usually followed local fashion. In Morocco's Berber regions, Jewish women dressed much like Muslim Berber women, while their headdresses remained distinctively Jewish. Kurdish Jews wore the same styles as their neighbors, often in finer fabrics.

Rules on dress. In parts of the Islamic world, Jews and Christians lived as *dhimmis*, protected non-Muslim minorities with set rights and limits. A text known as the Pact of Umar, whose present form scholars date to about the ninth century, told non-Muslims not to imitate Muslim dress. Enforcement varied greatly by place and period, and rulers in medieval Christian Europe also imposed distinguishing dress or badges on Jews. A modern sourcebook notes that such rules were often ignored, yet they could also grow stricter, and some remained in force in Yemen into the twentieth century. In Tehran in 1896 and 1897, an attempt to force Jews to wear a distinctive patch ended when the Shah stopped it.

Rules that applied to everyone. Ottoman law required all men, of every religion, to wear the fez from 1829. The Turkish Republic then banned the fez in 1925.

Reading a garment

Dress often signaled a woman's stage of life. In Salonica, married Sephardic women wore the *kofya*, a headdress with a long silk hair tube, until about 1940. Across the Ottoman Empire, jewelry showed whether a woman was married, and it formed part of her dowry.

Some clothing accompanied a woman for life. In Sana'a, a ceremonial dress called the *lulwi*, worn after childbirth, could become a woman's burial garment.

Community by community

Morocco

City women wore the *bata*, a skirt called the *saya*, and a shawl. Men wore wide trousers, a waistcoat, a silk belt, and the hooded *jellaba*. For celebrations, women wore the *keswa el kbira*, a velvet "great dress" embroidered in gold that families trace to Spain. In Tetouan, until about 1950, bride and groom wore a shroud tunic beneath their wedding clothes.

Sources: Alliance Israélite Universelle; Israel Museum labels, Jewish Museum NY

Yemen

In the nineteenth century Jewish silversmiths made most of Yemen's silver jewelry, famous for filigree and tiny granules, worn by Jewish and Muslim women alike. Jewish embroiderers in Sana'a made festive leggings worn only by Jewish women in Yemen's cities. A 1930s girl's dress covered with cowrie shells was meant to protect a child with smallpox.

Sources: Victoria and Albert Museum; Israel Museum; J. Weekly (2018)

Ottoman Sephardic lands

Men and women wore the *entari*, a long robe shared with neighbors of other faiths. Outdoors, women wore a *ferace* cloak and a veil. By the late nineteenth century many families mixed *alaturka* (Ottoman) and *alafranka* (European) styles, saving Ottoman dress for Shabbat and holidays. Treasured bridal gowns were sometimes remade into Torah ark curtains.

Sources: University of Washington; Jewish Women's Archive; Jewish Museum London; Jewish Museum NY

Iraq

In Baghdad, Jewish women went out wrapped in an *izar* with a fine black horsehair face veil, while Christian women left their faces uncovered. Baghdad styles blended imported and local fashion. The Laura Kadoorie School for Girls taught dressmaking and embroidery.

Sources: Israel Museum labels; Jewish Museum London

Iran

A bridal jacket from Isfahan glows with silver tinsel embroidery on silk velvet. After the Shah visited Paris in 1873, a short, flared skirt resembling a ballet tutu came into fashion, as an outfit from Mashhad shows. Jewish women peddlers sold jewelry and fabrics to Muslim households, and Jews took part in Iran's nineteenth century silk trade.

Sources: Israel Museum labels; Encyclopaedia Iranica (Daniel Tsadik)

Bukhara (Central Asia)

Bukharan Jews were known as dyers and traders of *ikat*, silk woven from threads dyed in patterns before weaving. Dyeing was considered a lowly craft because it stained the hands, yet coats such as the *kaltachak* were lined with dazzling ikat. Mourning cloaks avoided bright colors.

Sources: Israel Museum labels; J. Weekly (2018)

Kurdistan

Men wore suits of handwoven wool; women wore a long underdress, a vest, a coat, and wide trousers. Women sewed for the family until male tailors with sewing machines took over. In Sandor, a bride named Farha Kirma made her wedding dress with her father.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Iranica (Ora Shwartz-Beeri); Israel Museum labels

Tunisia, Libya, Algeria

Until the early twentieth century, a Jewish bride in Tunis wore trousers as part of her outfit. In Djerba, women wore a distinctive asymmetric chemise. In Algeria, Jewish women kept an older ensemble for ceremonies until they too adopted European styles.

Source: Israel Museum labels, Jewish Museum NY

Artisans, amulets, and change

Makers and markets. Yemen's Jewish silversmiths crafted jewelry and dagger sheaths for Muslim clients and ritual objects for Jewish ones. Some pieces, inscribed in Hebrew and Arabic, name both the ruler and the craftsman. In Iran, Islamic law treated fees for working gold and silver as a kind of usury, so non-Muslims sometimes filled the trade. After most of Yemen's Jews moved to Israel in 1949 and 1950, the craft declined in Yemen, and Yemenite artisans brought it to Israel, including to the Bezalel art school.

Jewelry that protects. Some necklaces held an amulet case. A groom's outfit from Zakho, in Kurdistan, bears protective diamond patterns. (See our Hamsa explainer.)

Modern times. From the nineteenth century, European clothing spread through cities. The Alliance Israélite Universelle, founded in 1860, opened schools across the region, and girls' lessons in the Ottoman lands included sewing and embroidery. In Moroccan cities, girls often wore European made dresses while elders kept traditional clothing. Today, some families wear heirloom or traditional garments again at henna parties and weddings.

Common misconceptions

- **"Jews always dressed differently."** Most of the time they wore local styles. Distinctive details varied by place and period.
- **"Dress rules were the same everywhere."** They were enforced unevenly, and some laws, like the Ottoman fez rule, applied to all.
- **"Traditional dress is a costume."** These garments were real clothing, often family treasures.
- **"Filigree was only for Jews."** Jewish silversmiths in Yemen made jewelry for Jewish and Muslim women alike.

Words to know

Keswa el kbira *Moroccan Judeo Arabic*

"The great dress," a gold embroidered velvet ensemble.

Jellaba *Arabic*

A long hooded outer robe worn in Morocco.

Entari *Turkish*

A long Ottoman robe worn by men and women.

Fez *Turkish and Arabic*

A brimless cap, required for Ottoman men from 1829.

Kofya *Judeo Spanish*

The married woman's headdress of Salonica.

Izar *Arabic*

A large outdoor wrap worn by women in Baghdad.

Ikat *Malay, used worldwide*

Cloth woven from threads dyed in patterns before weaving.

Filigree *English*

Jewelry made from fine twisted silver or gold wire.

Dhimmi *Arabic*

A protected non-Muslim under Islamic rule.

Kame'a *Hebrew*

An amulet, often worn as jewelry.

Bringing dress and jewelry to life

In the public school classroom

- Use museum objects as primary sources: ask students what a garment's materials, wear, and decoration reveal about its owner.
- Compare dress across Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities in one city, and discuss shared and distinct features.
- Read the Pact of Umar excerpt (Fordham) with care, alongside evidence of how unevenly such rules were applied.
- Do not hold dress up or costume activities that turn cultures into costumes; study images and objects instead.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Invite families to bring a garment, photo, or piece of jewelry and tell its story.
- Visit the Magnes Collection, the Jewish Museum, or ANU online, and research one object together.
- Read *Shoham's Bangle* with young children and discuss heirlooms.
- Explore the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for heritage ideas all year.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: What did your grandparents wear? Is there an heirloom with a story?
- Photograph and label family jewelry and textiles, noting who wore them and where.
- Record an elder's memories and share them with JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- What can a single piece of clothing or jewelry tell us that a written document cannot?
- Why might people in one place dress alike, and why might rulers sometimes try to make groups look different?
- What happens to a garment's meaning when it moves from a family closet to a museum, or back to a wedding?

Learn more

Watch and listen

[The Bukharian Jewish Community: History and Culture](#) (JIMENA, 2021)

youtube.com/watch?v=DcH7_nKWxu0

[Sephardic Wedding Traditions: Stories from Around the World](#) (JIMENA, 2025)

youtube.com/watch?v=zlgn6BFAnZA

[Online Tour of the Museum of the Jewish People](#) (JIMENA, 2020)

youtube.com/watch?v=cat0AvjvKLY

Read

[The Jewish Wardrobe: From the Collection of the Israel Museum](#), by Esther Juhasz and others (5 Continents Editions, 2012).

fivecontinentseditions.com/en/?p=7703

[Sephardi Jews in the Ottoman Empire: Aspects of Material Culture](#), edited by Esther Juhasz (Israel Museum, 1990).

primolevicenter.org/sephardi-jews-in-the-ottoman-empire-aspects-of-material-culture

[The Yemenites: Two Thousand Years of Jewish Culture](#), by Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper (Israel Museum, 2000).

col.mjb-jmb.org/Detail/objects/21171?lang=en_US

Explore online

[The Jewish Costume of Morocco](#) (Alliance Israélite Universelle)

bibliotheque-numerique-aiu.org/en/exhibitions-us/exhibitions/80-the-jewish-costume-of-morocco

[Veiled Meanings: Fashioning Jewish Dress](#) (Jewish Museum NY, with the Israel Museum)

thejewishmuseum.org/press/veiled-meanings-final-release

[Necklace \(ma'anageh\), Sana'a](#) (Jewish Museum NY)

collections.thejewishmuseum.org/collection/4779-necklace

[Lulwi Dress, Sana'a](#) (ANU Museum of the Jewish People)

index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/the-islamic-home-lulwi-dress

[Diadem and Dagger: Jewish Silversmiths of Yemen](#) (Walters Art Museum)

thewalters.org/exhibitions/diadem-and-dagger-jewish-silversmiths-of-yemen

[In Plain Sight: Jewish Arts and Lives in the Muslim World](#) (Magnes Collection, UC Berkeley)

magnes.berkeley.edu/exhibitions/in-plain-sight-jewish-arts-and-lives-in-the-muslim-world

[Purim Costumes Inspired by Ottoman Fashion](#) (University of Washington)

jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/crowdsourced-photos-capture-purim-costumes-inspired-by-ottoman-fashion

[Clothing of the Kurdish Jews](#) (Encyclopaedia Iranica)

iranicaonline.org/articles/clothing-xvii

[The Pact of Umar](#) (Fordham Internet Medieval Sourcebook)

fordham.edu/halsall/jewish/jews-umar.asp

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"Telling Silent Mizrahi Stories," by Sarah Sassoon On her picture book *Shoham's Bangle* (Kar-Ben, 2022), in which a grandmother's bangle opens a story of Jewish Baghdad.
distinctionsjournal.org/shohams-bangle

From JIMENA

Culture and Holidays video collection

jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Share your family's story

jimena.org/share-your-story



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 Israel Museum and the Jewish Museum, New York (*Veiled Meanings* labels); the Alliance Israélite Universelle; the Victoria and Albert Museum; the Walters Art Museum; ANU Museum of the Jewish People; the Magnes Collection, UC Berkeley; the Encyclopaedia Iranica; the University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies; the Jewish Women's Archive; the Jewish Museum London; the University of Michigan Library; the Fordham Internet Medieval Sourcebook; and J. Weekly. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.