

LIFECYCLE AND CUSTOMS

Henna

A night of color, music, and blessing on the eve of a wedding, celebrated by Jewish families from Morocco to Yemen to India.

WHAT IT IS

A festive gathering, usually a few days before a wedding, where henna paste is placed on the bride's hands, and today often the groom's too.

WHERE

Jewish communities across North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and India, each with its own customs.

WHY

The deep reddish color was believed to bring joy, blessing, and protection to the couple as they began a new life.

TODAY

A revived tradition at weddings in Israel, the United States, and around the world, often called simply "the henna."

For centuries, Jewish families gathered in the days before a wedding for an evening of songs, sweets, and dazzling traditional dress. At the center of the celebration was henna, a reddish brown dye made from the crushed leaves of the henna plant (*Lawsonia inermis*). Jews shared this custom with their Muslim and Christian neighbors across the region, and made it their own with Hebrew blessings, Jewish songs, and family traditions passed down from grandmothers to granddaughters.

What happens at a henna?

Every community celebrated differently, but many henna evenings shared the same elements:

- **Timing.** The henna was often held a few days before the wedding, so the color would deepen by the wedding day. In many communities it was linked to the bride's visit to the *mikveh*, the ritual bath.
- **Dress.** Brides, and often guests, wore elaborate traditional clothing embroidered with gold thread, with heavy jewelry and headdresses.
- **Music.** Women sang special henna songs in Judeo Arabic and other Jewish languages, accompanied by drums and joyful ululation.
- **The henna itself.** Depending on the community, henna was pressed into the palm, wrapped around the fingertips, or painted in patterns on the hands and feet.
- **Food.** Tables overflowed with sweets, pastries, and dishes special to each community.

A women's celebration

Historically, the henna was a space led by women. Mothers and grandmothers prepared the henna, and women's songs gave voice to the bride's feelings about leaving her childhood home and beginning a new life. In Baghdad, women played the drums. Scholar Rachel Sharaby describes how Yemenite henna songs addressed the bride first as a young girl and later as a wife and mother.

Community by community

Yemen

The henna was the heart of a wedding week that could last several days. A professional dresser called the *shar'eh* dressed the bride, who sat on a raised seat as a candlelit procession moved toward her. Henna was spread on her palms and the soles of her feet.

The bride wore a gold embroidered gown, layers of silver filigree, amber, and coral jewelry, and a tall pearl crown, the *tishbuk lu'lu'*. The full costume could weigh about 10 kilograms (22 pounds).

Sources: Rachel Sharaby, Folkstreams; J. Weekly (2003)

Morocco

In northern Morocco the evening was called the *Noche de Berberisca*. Across Morocco, from Tangier and Tetuan to Fez, Marrakech, and Essaouira, brides wore the *keswa el kbira*, "the great dress," a velvet ensemble embroidered in gold that a father gave his daughter and that she wore at major celebrations for the rest of her life.

Women sang "Abyadi Ana," the best known Moroccan Jewish henna song, in Judeo Arabic. Today couples are often lifted high on a decorated throne called the *amariya*.

Sources: Alliance Israélite Universelle; Center for Jewish History; Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre; Harif

Iraq

Female relatives placed small balls of henna on the fingertips of the bride and groom, often wrapped to hold the color. The celebration was led by women, with songs in Iraqi Judeo Arabic. Families remember that the Iraqi Jewish word for applying henna also carries the meaning "to bless."

Sources: Harif; J. Weekly (2026)

Kurdistan

Henna was not only for weddings. Kurdish Jewish women gathered by the river on the eve of Purim, in a women's celebration called *Leil Purim*, and applied henna to one another.

Source: My Jewish Learning

Iran

Persian Jewish families celebrate henna parties with music, food, and a joyful ululation called *kell*. In Los Angeles, home to a large Iranian Jewish community, the henna remains a beloved part of many weddings.

Source: Jewish Journal (2018)

Libya

In Libyan Jewish tradition, henna was applied not only to the hands but also to the bride's hair. JIMENA's own collection of traditional garments has included Libyan wedding costumes worn at henna celebrations.

Sources: Israel Film Archive; J. Weekly (2012)

Bukhara (Central Asia)

During the wedding week, after the bride's visit to the bathhouse, the women of the family gathered to paint her hands with henna.

Source: Encyclopedia of World Cultures (Gale)

India (Bene Israel)

The Bene Israel *mehndi* ceremony features intricate patterns on the bride's hands. In a playful custom, the groom searches for his name hidden in the design.

Source: Times of Israel (2013)

Jewish communities in Algeria and elsewhere also had henna traditions of their own. Many of these customs are best preserved in family memory, which is why JIMENA invites families to share their stories.

Roots and revival

Ancient roots. The Bible's Song of Songs mentions henna, *kofer* in Hebrew, as a fragrant blossom and a symbol of love (Song of Songs 1:14 and 4:13). The Song does not describe a henna ceremony; the wedding custom developed much later as part of the shared culture of the region. A later Jewish teaching found meaning in the Hebrew word for henna itself, reading its letters as a hint to three commandments traditionally associated with Jewish women.

Loss and return. After the mass migration of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa in the mid twentieth century, many families in Israel set the henna aside, as their traditions were often looked down upon. From the 1980s onward, and especially since 2000, renewed pride in Mizrahi heritage brought the henna back. Today it is a mainstream part of Israeli wedding culture, usually held as a single evening with the bride and groom celebrated together.

In the United States. More and more couples with Middle Eastern and North African roots are including a henna in their weddings. In 2025, JIMENA and the Magnes Collection at UC Berkeley hosted a community henna celebration of Middle Eastern Jewish wedding traditions.

Common misconceptions

- **"There is one Jewish henna custom."** Each community had its own songs, clothing, and ways of applying henna. The combined ceremony seen at many weddings today is a recent blend.
- **"Henna means drawn patterns."** In many Mizrahi communities, henna was a simple dab or ball in the palm. Detailed patterns are typical of Bene Israel and Yemenite traditions.
- **"The henna ceremony is in the Bible."** The Song of Songs mentions the henna plant, not a ceremony.
- **"Jews borrowed it."** Henna was part of a culture Jews shared with their neighbors for centuries, expressed in distinctly Jewish ways.

Words to know

Henna (hinna) *Arabic and Hebrew*

The henna plant and the reddish brown dye made from its leaves.

Kofer *Biblical Hebrew*

The word for henna in the Song of Songs.

Mikveh *Hebrew*

A ritual bath. A bride's visit to the mikveh was often part of the henna days.

Noche de Berberisca *Haketia (Moroccan Judeo Spanish)*

The henna night in northern Morocco.

Keswa el kbira *Moroccan Judeo Arabic*

"The great dress," the Moroccan Jewish bridal costume.

Amariya *Arabic*

A decorated throne on which the couple is carried.

Tishbuk lu'lu' *Yemenite Arabic*

The tall pearl crown of the Yemenite Jewish bride.

Shar'eh *Yemenite Arabic*

A professional who dressed the bride and led songs.

Kell *Persian*

A joyful ululation sung at celebrations.

Mehndi *Hindi and Urdu*

Henna, as it is called by the Bene Israel of India.

Bringing the henna to life

In the public school classroom

- Teach the henna as part of a culture shared across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia, and compare wedding customs among Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Christian communities.
- Look closely at primary sources: study the Moroccan bridal costumes in the Alliance Israélite Universelle online exhibit and listen to “Abyadi Ana.”
- Map it: trace the communities in this explainer and where their families live today.
- Do not stage a mock Jewish ceremony or have students recite blessings.
- Skip applying henna to skin in class. Allergies are possible, and so called “black henna” can cause serious reactions (see the FDA fact sheet below).

In Jewish schools and communities

- Hold a henna celebration during Mizrahi Heritage Month in November, or before a community wedding.
- Invite grandparents and community elders to share henna memories, songs, and photographs.
- Read *The Henna Helper* with young children, and study Song of Songs 1:14 and 4:13 with older students.
- Explore the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for ideas on weaving heritage into the whole school year.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: Did our family hold a henna? What did people wear? What songs did they sing?
- Look through wedding photographs together and label who, where, and when.
- Record an elder's memories and share them with JIMENA's oral history project.
- Planning a wedding? Ask the oldest members of your family how your community celebrated, and make the custom your own.

Questions for discussion

- Why do you think so many cultures mark big life changes with a special color, food, or piece of clothing?
- What happens to a tradition when families move to a new country? What helps a custom survive, and what makes it fade?
- What does the revival of the henna tell us about how people reclaim pride in their heritage?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Henna Party with JIMENA and the Magnes, March 2025 (JIMENA)
vimeo.com/1069368608

"Abyadi Ana," the Moroccan Jewish henna song (Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre, with audio)
jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/content/abyadi-ana

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

Read

The Henna Helper, by Tami Lehman-Wilzig, illustrated by Yinon Ptahia (Apples & Honey Press, 2025). A Yemenite Jewish picture book for young readers.
pjllibrary.org/beyond-books/pjblog/june-2026/why-we-chose-this-book-the-henna-helper

"The Bride's Henna Rituals: Symbols, Meanings and Changes," by Rachel Sharaby (Folkstreams). A scholarly essay on Yemenite henna.
folkstreams.net/contexts/the-brides-henna-rituals-symbols-meanings-and-changes-by-rachel-sharaby

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"Unheard Stories of the Yemenite Aliyah," by Tami Lehman-Wilzig
The author of *The Henna Helper* on *On the Wings of Eagles*, her picture book about the Yemenite airlift.
distinctionsjournal.org/on-the-wings-of-eagles

"Drawing Our Traditions into the Story," by Etan Basseri
On Sephardic and Mizrahi traditions in picture books.
distinctionsjournal.org/basseri

Explore online

Henna at Jewish Weddings (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/henna-at-jewish-weddings

The Jewish Costume of Morocco (Alliance Israélite Universelle online exhibit)
bibliotheque-numerique-aiu.org/en/exhibitions-us/exhibitions/80-the-jewish-costume-of-morocco

Tableau Vivant: The Berberisca Ceremony (Center for Jewish History and American Sephardi Federation)
programs.cjh.org/event/tableau-vivant-the-berberisca-ceremony

Leil Purim: A Kurdish Jewish Women's Holiday (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/leil-purim-a-kurdish-jewish-womens-holiday

Henna Party: Celebrate Middle Eastern Jewish Wedding Traditions (The Magnes Collection, UC Berkeley)
live-magnes-wp.pantheon.berkeley.edu/program/henna-party-celebrate-middle-eastern-jewish-wedding-traditions

The Charm of Jewish Henna Ceremonies (Jewish Journal)
jewishjournal.com/community/277707/the-charm-of-jewish-henna-ceremonies

Harif Henna Events (Harif, UK)
harif.org/harif-henna-events

Song of Songs 1:14 (Sefaria)
sefaria.org/Song_of_Songs.1.14

Temporary Tattoos, Henna/Mehndi, and "Black Henna": Fact Sheet (U.S. Food and Drug Administration)
fda.gov/cosmetics/cosmetic-products/temporary-tattoos-hennamehndi-and-black-henna-fact-sheet

From JIMENA

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit
sepharditoolkit.org

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 Rachel Sharaby (Folkstreams); My Jewish Learning; the Alliance Israélite Universelle; the Center for Jewish History; the Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre; the Magnes Collection, UC Berkeley; J. Weekly; Jewish Journal; Harif; the Israel Film Archive; the Encyclopedia of World Cultures (Gale); and the Times of Israel. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.