

LIFECYCLE AND CUSTOMS

Hillulot and Pilgrimage

Candles, music, and feasting at the tombs of beloved sages and prophets, from Morocco and Tunisia to Iraq, Iran, and Israel.

WHAT IT IS

A *hillula* is a joyful gathering on the anniversary of a righteous sage's death, usually held at the sage's tomb.

WHERE

Across North Africa, Iraq, Kurdistan, and Iran, and today in Israel, where pilgrims also gather at tombs of sages and prophets.

WHY

Pilgrims come to honor the sage, pray for health, livelihood, and family, and reunite with relatives and old neighbors.

TODAY

Families who emigrated return to Morocco and Tunisia for these gatherings, and huge hillulot take place in Israel each year.

For many Sephardic and Mizrahi families, visiting the grave of a holy person was not a sad occasion but a celebration. On the anniversary of a beloved sage's death, people traveled for days, pitched tents beside the tomb, lit candles, prayed, sang, and feasted. In Morocco alone, Jews recognized more than 600 *tzaddikim*, righteous men and women honored as saints. In Iraq and Iran, Jews made pilgrimages to tombs that tradition links to biblical prophets and heroes. Some of these holy sites were cherished by Jews and Muslims alike.

What happens at a hillula?

The word *hillula* is Aramaic for "festivity." It first described a wedding celebration. Later it came to mean the anniversary of a great sage's death, marked with rejoicing. One teaching explains the joy this way: when a righteous person dies, the soul is united with God, like a bride and groom. Customs differ from place to place, but many hillulot share these elements:

- **Candles.** Pilgrims light candles at the tomb, and in some places toss them into a fire burning beside it.
- **Prayer and touch.** Visitors touch or kiss the tombstone and ask the sage to pray on their behalf for health, livelihood, and family.
- **Auctions of honors.** Large candles and honors, such as opening the tomb, are auctioned. The money cares for the tomb, and a blessing is said for each winner.
- **Feasting and music.** Families share meals, drums, and songs.

Ziyara: the visit

In Arabic, a visit to a holy tomb is called a *ziyara*. Jews of Iraq and Kurdistan called the festival of Shavuot *Eid al Ziyara*, "the festival of the pilgrimage," because that was when whole communities traveled to the tombs of the prophets. In Morocco, Jews and Muslims each had their own saints, and researcher Issachar Ben-Ami counted at least 126 Jewish saints who were honored by Muslim visitors too.

Pilgrimage places

Morocco: Rabbi Amram ben Diwan

A sage born in Jerusalem, he came to Morocco to raise money for yeshivas in Hebron and died in Ouezzane in 1782, on Lag BaOmer. His hillula, on that day, became the largest in Morocco. Pilgrims camp in tents around the tomb, bid on boxes of white candles, and toss the candles into a great fire by the grave.

Source: ReformJudaism.org

Morocco: Rabbi Haim Pinto, Essaouira

A respected rabbinical judge, he died in 1845 and is buried in the old Jewish cemetery of Essaouira, a port city where Jews once made up a large share of the population. His hillula, a gathering of several days, is held around his anniversary on 26 Elul, in late summer or early fall. In 2022, more than 2,000 pilgrims came from around the world.

Sources: Times of Israel; Qantara.de; Morocco World News

Tunisia: El Ghriba, Djerba

Tradition holds that the Ghriba synagogue was founded by Jews who fled Jerusalem after the Temple was destroyed in 586 BCE. At Lag BaOmer, pilgrims light candles and write wishes on eggs placed in a small grotto at the synagogue. A tall decorated candelabrum, the *menara*, is draped with scarves and paraded outside with drums and song. Muslim visitors have long joined the festivities.

Sources: Associated Press; Times of Israel (AFP); Encyclopaedia Judaica

Iraq: Ezekiel at al Kifl

Near the city of Hilla stands the shrine of the prophet Ezekiel, known in Islam as Dhu'l Kifl. For centuries Jews and Muslims prayed there. In the 1800s and 1900s, Iraqi Jews came from Baghdad and Hilla each Shavuot. The last large Jewish pilgrimage was in the 1950s. Hebrew inscriptions still line the inner room.

Source: Ajam Media Collective (Alex Shams)

Kurdistan: Nahum at Alqosh

Nearly the whole Jewish community of Mosul came to the tomb of the prophet Nahum at Shavuot, staying up to two weeks. Pilgrims read from a scroll of the Book of Nahum, the men circled the tomb seven times, and families shared fruit left overnight on the tomb as a blessing. The last pilgrimage took place in 1951. A Chaldean Christian caretaker has looked after the site since.

Source: My Jewish Learning, with the Diarna Project

Iraq: Ezra on the Tigris

In southern Iraq, a shrine on the Tigris River is honored as the tomb of Ezra the Scribe. Muslims also revere Ezra there, and Hebrew writing remains on the walls.

Source: Chaldean News (Adhid Miri)

Iran: Daniel and Esther

In Shush, ancient Susa, Iranian Jews and Muslims visit the tomb that tradition links to the prophet Daniel. In Hamadan, Jews have long made pilgrimages to the shrine that tradition links to Esther and Mordechai.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Tomb of Daniel (Wikipedia)

Israel: Meron and Netivot

On Lag BaOmer, huge crowds gather at Meron, the traditional tomb of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, with bonfires and first haircuts for three year old boys. In Netivot, about 100,000 people gathered in 2026 for the hillula of the Baba Sali, Rabbi Israel Abuhatzzeira, a Moroccan born sage and healer who died in 1984 and is buried there.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Times of Israel

Departure and return

A tradition carried abroad. In the mid twentieth century, nearly all the Jews of Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq, and Kurdistan emigrated, many to Israel and France. Many pilgrimages in Iraq and Kurdistan ended in the early 1950s. In Morocco, some tombs saw only a few dozen visitors where hundreds once gathered.

New hillulot in Israel. Immigrants from Morocco brought their devotion with them. Scholar Yoram Bilu has studied how saint veneration took root in Israel's development towns, and the tomb of the Baba Sali in Netivot became one of the country's great pilgrimage sites. Large crowds also bring dangers: in 2021, a crush at Meron on Lag BaOmer killed 45 people.

Heritage travel. In recent years, Morocco has restored many Jewish cemeteries. In 2022, Meknes held its first hillula in 60 years after its old cemetery was restored. At Djerba, the Ghriba festival has continued despite a deadly attack in May 2023, and in 2026 visitors from abroad returned for the menara procession. For many families, these journeys connect children and grandchildren to places their elders called home.

Common misconceptions

- **"Visiting a grave is always mournful."** A hillula is a celebration, with music, food, and joy.
- **"Jews worship the saints."** Pilgrims honor the sage and ask him to pray for them, but their prayers are directed to God.
- **"Hillulot are only about Lag BaOmer."** Each sage has his own anniversary, throughout the year.
- **"Jewish and Muslim holy places were always separate."** Many shrines, from Ezekiel's tomb to Moroccan saints' graves, drew both Jews and Muslims.

Words to know

Hillula (hillulot) *Aramaic and Hebrew*

"Festivity." The celebration of a sage's death anniversary.

Tzaddik (tzaddikim) *Hebrew*

A righteous person, honored as a saint.

Ziyara *Arabic*

A visit or pilgrimage to a holy tomb.

Eid al Ziyara *Judeo Arabic*

"Festival of the pilgrimage," the name for Shavuot among Iraqi and Kurdish Jews.

Lag BaOmer *Hebrew*

The 33rd day of the counting of the Omer, between Passover and Shavuot.

Yahrzeit *Yiddish*

The anniversary of a death.

Menara *Judeo Arabic*

The tall decorated candelabrum carried in the Ghriba procession.

Mellah *Moroccan Arabic*

The Jewish quarter of a Moroccan city. Many had a patron saint.

Mahia *Moroccan Judeo Arabic*

A spirit distilled from figs, often flavored with anise.

Se'uda *Hebrew*

A festive meal.

Bringing hillulot to life

In the public school classroom

- Compare pilgrimage in many traditions: the Hajj, the Camino de Santiago, Hindu pilgrimages, and Jewish visits to the tombs of sages.
- Map the sites in this explainer and discuss why Jews and Muslims honored some of the same holy places.
- Watch JIMENA's films from Essaouira and Djerba and discuss what a place can teach us about history.
- Teach about these customs. Do not light candles, recite prayers, or stage a mock hillula in class.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Mark the yahrzeit of a sage from your community's tradition with stories, songs, and a festive meal.
- Invite families who have traveled to Morocco, Tunisia, or Israel for a hillula to share photographs.
- Learn about Rabbi Amram ben Diwan, Rabbi Haim Pinto, or the Baba Sali, and the stories told about them.
- Explore the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for ways to weave heritage into the school year.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: Did our family visit a saint's tomb? Whose? What did you eat, sing, and pray for?
- Look for photographs or candles brought home from a hillula, and label who, where, and when.
- Planning a heritage trip? Ask elders which cemeteries, synagogues, and homes to visit.
- Record an elder's memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might people celebrate, rather than mourn, on the anniversary of a beloved teacher's death?
- What does it tell us that Jews and Muslims in Morocco, Iraq, and Iran honored some of the same holy places?
- When a community leaves its homeland, how can it stay connected to the places that mattered to it?

Learn more

Watch and listen

JIMENA's Journey Through Morocco: Essaouira (JIMENA)
vimeo.com/558455690

JIMENA's Jewish Journey Through Tunisia: El Ghriba Synagogue (JIMENA)
vimeo.com/558450359

Documentaries and Films collection (JIMENA)
jimena.org/videos/documentaries-and-films

Read

Saint Veneration among the Jews in Morocco, by Issachar Ben-Ami (Wayne State University Press, 1998). The classic study. Link: an article by Cory Driver that draws on it.
publishup.uni-potsdam.de/files/47138/pardes25_89-102.pdf

The Saints' Impresarios: Dreamers, Healers, and Holy Men in Israel's Urban Periphery, by Yoram Bilu (Academic Studies Press, 2009). For teachers.
ingramacademic.com/products/the-saints-impresarios-9781934843710

Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews, edited by Houshan Sarshar (Jewish Publication Society and the Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002).
sdjewishworld.com/?p=58361

Explore online

Hillula (Encyclopaedia Judaica, via Jewish Virtual Library)
jewishvirtuallibrary.org/hillula

Moroccan Tradition (The Forward, on Moroccan hillulot)
forward.com/articles/107975

When Jewish Cemeteries Rock: My Moroccan Lag BaOmer Adventure (ReformJudaism.org)
reformjudaism.org/blog/when-jewish-cemeteries-rock-my-moroccan-lag-baomer-adventure

Morocco's Jewish Legacy: The Rabbi of Essaouira (Qantara.de)
qantara.de/en/article/morocco%CA%B9s-jewish-legacy-rabbi-essaouira

Foreign visitors return to Jewish pilgrimage in Tunisia (Associated Press, 2026)
ksat.com/news/world/2026/05/06/foreign-visitors-return-to-jewish-pilgrimage-in-tunisia-under-tight-security

A Jewish Shrine inside a Mosque: Ezekiel's Tomb in Iraq (Ajam Media Collective)
ajamcc.com/2019/03/03/ezekiels-tomb-jewish-iraq-muslim

Nahum's Tomb: A Shavuot Like No Other (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/nahums-tomb-a-shavuot-like-no-other

Are Esther and Mordecai Buried in This Iranian Tomb? (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/esthers-tomb

Lag BaOmer in Meron (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/lag-baomer-in-meron

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"A Broken Peace Leaves a Family's Heritage Trip in Shards," by Adam Eilath A father's account of a family trip to Tunisia, including the Ghriba gathering in May 2023. For adults.
distinctionsjournal.org/a-broken-peace-leaves-a-familys-heritage-trip-in-shards

From JIMENA

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

Oral history collection
jimena.org/oral-history

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 Encyclopaedia Judaica (via Jewish Virtual Library); the Jewish Languages Project; My Jewish Learning and the Diarna Project; The Forward; ReformJudaism.org; Cory Driver in *PaRDeS*; Issachar Ben-Ami; Yoram Bilu; the Times of Israel; Qantara.de; Morocco World News; Hespress; the Associated Press; Ajam Media Collective; the Chaldean News; Voice of America; and Israel Hayom. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.