

LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND THOUGHT

Languages of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews

From Ladino to Judeo Arabic, Juhuri, and Neo Aramaic: the many tongues of Jewish life across the Middle East, North Africa, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

JEWISH LANGUAGES

Jews developed their own versions of the languages around them, usually written in Hebrew letters and rich in Hebrew and Aramaic words.

TWO LAYERS

Hebrew and Aramaic were for prayer and study. A Jewish form of the local language was for home, work, and song.

TODAY

Almost all of these languages are endangered, and many had far more speakers in 1900 than they do today.

REVIVAL

Descendants are reclaiming them through songs, recipes, classes, recordings, and everyday "heritage words."

If you had visited a Jewish neighborhood in Baghdad, Salonica, Isfahan, or Zakho a century ago, you would have heard prayers in Hebrew, but conversations in Judeo Arabic, Ladino, a Jewish dialect of Persian, or Neo Aramaic. Linguists call these "Jewish languages": distinctive ways Jews spoke the languages of their neighbors, shaped by Jewish life, sprinkled with Hebrew and Aramaic, and usually written in the Hebrew alphabet. Together they tell the story of where Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews lived, how they connected with their neighbors, and how they carried their heritage with them when they left.

A map of languages

Judeo Spanish (Ladino, Judezmo)

Where: The Ottoman Empire, after the expulsion from Spain in 1492: Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans, and today Israel and the Americas.

Built on medieval Spanish, it absorbed Turkish, Greek, French, and Italian words. It was printed in Rashi script and handwritten in a cursive called *Solitreo*. The Holocaust destroyed many of its communities; Salonica alone had about 50,000 Ladino speakers before World War II.

Estimated speakers: about 51,000 (2024), with no accurate count

Haketia

Where: Northern Morocco, including Tetuan and Tangier.

The Judeo Spanish of northern Morocco, full of Arabic and Hebrew words. One early glossary found that more than a third of its entries came from Arabic, like *zinzela*, "earthquake."

Estimated speakers: about 1,000 (2024)

Judeo Arabic

Where: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Yemen.

Spoken and written by Jews across the Arabic speaking world for over a thousand years. Great thinkers including Saadia Gaon and Maimonides wrote in it. Today the island of Djerba, Tunisia, is the one place where children still learn it at home.

Estimated speakers: about 82,000 (2026), down from 415,000 in 1900

Judeo Persian and the Jewish dialects of Iran

Where: Iran, and today Israel and California.

Judeo Persian has a literature reaching back centuries; the oldest known Judeo Persian translation of the Torah dates to 1319. Cities such as Isfahan, Hamadan, Kashan, Shiraz, and Yazd also had their own Jewish dialects, now spoken by very few people.

Estimated speakers: about 100,000 (Judeo Persian, 2024)

Jewish Neo Aramaic

Where: Kurdistan, in what is now northern Iraq, northwestern Iran, and southeastern Turkey.

A living member of the Aramaic family, the language of the Talmud and the Kaddish prayer. Dialects include Lishana Deni and Lishan Didan. The Israeli band HULAULA performs in it today.

Estimated speakers: about 20,000 (2023)

Bukhori (Judeo Tajik)

Where: Central Asia (Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), and today Queens, New York, and Israel.

A Persian family language. Under Soviet rule its alphabet changed from Hebrew to Latin letters and then to Cyrillic, and publishing in Bukhori was banned in 1940.

Estimated speakers: about 50,000 (2024)

Juhuri (Judeo Tat)

Where: The Caucasus (Azerbaijan and Dagestan), home of the Mountain Jews.

A Persian family language that became one of Dagestan's official languages in 1938, a rare honor for a Jewish language. Children in Red Town (Qırmızı Qəsəbə), Azerbaijan, still learn it at home.

Estimated speakers: about 30,000 (2024)

Judeo Amazigh

Where: The Atlas Mountains and Sous Valley of southern Morocco.

Usually a second language alongside Judeo Arabic, used with Amazigh neighbors and in wedding songs. It is sometimes called Judeo Berber, but many now consider "Berber" an outsider's term.

Estimated speakers: about 200 (2024)

Georgian Jews, who follow Sephardic religious traditions, also have their own language, Judeo Georgian (Kivruli), written in the Georgian alphabet. All speaker figures are rough estimates from the Jewish Language Project; for several languages no accurate count exists.

Hebrew and Aramaic: the languages of prayer and study

Before modern Hebrew was revived as an everyday language, Hebrew was the language of the Bible, prayer, and scholarship. Aramaic held a special place too. It is the language of most of the Babylonian Talmud, the Mourner's Kaddish, the Kol Nidre prayer of Yom Kippur, the traditional marriage contract (*ketubah*), and Passover songs such as "Had Gadya." Yemenite Jews still read the Aramaic translation of the Torah, the *Targum*, aloud in synagogue.

Writing in Hebrew letters. Most Jewish languages were written in the Hebrew alphabet, linking everyday speech to Hebrew learning and Jewish books. Ladino was printed in a typeface called Rashi script and handwritten in Solitreo. In the Soviet Union, Bukhori and Juhuri were forced to switch first to Latin and then to Cyrillic letters.

Words from home

Sarah Sassoon, an Iraqi Jewish writer whose family left Iraq in 1951, shares a few Iraqi Judeo Arabic words still used in her family:

- **Ashtidek:** "bless your hands," said to thank the cook after a meal
- **Ayouni:** "my eyes," a term of affection
- **Ashlonak:** a greeting that asks how you are

Many families still use words like these even after the language itself is no longer spoken. The Jewish Language Project calls them "heritage words."

Why the languages faded, and how they are coming back

Loss. In the mid twentieth century, most Jews of the Middle East and North Africa left their homelands, many as refugees. In Israel, new immigrants faced strong pressure to adopt Hebrew, and children stopped speaking the languages of their parents. The Holocaust destroyed many Ladino speaking communities, and Soviet policies suppressed Bukhori, Juhuri, and Judeo Georgian. In new countries, families shifted to English, French, Spanish, or Hebrew within a generation or two.

Revival. Today a new generation is reclaiming these languages. Israel created a National Authority for Ladino in 1997, and the Ladino magazine *Aki Yerushalayim* has been published since 1979. The University of Washington's Sephardic Studies Digital Collection preserves hundreds of Ladino books, documents, and recordings. The Jewish Language Project's Heirloom program pairs learners with speakers, and the Israeli band A-WA sets Yemenite Judeo Arabic poetry to contemporary music. International Ladino Day was first celebrated in 2013.

Common misconceptions

- **"All Sephardic Jews spoke Ladino."** Most Moroccan Jews spoke Judeo Arabic. Iraqi, Iranian, Yemenite, Kurdish, Bukharan, and Mountain Jews never spoke Ladino.
- **"Middle Eastern Jews spoke Hebrew."** Hebrew was for prayer and study. Daily life happened in Judeo Arabic, Judeo Persian, Aramaic, and other languages.
- **"Neo Aramaic is the language of Jesus."** It belongs to the same family, but it is a modern language, not the Aramaic of the first century.
- **"Bukhori and Juhuri are Russian or Turkic."** Both are Persian family languages, even though they are now written in Cyrillic.

Words to know

Jewish language

A language or variety used in a distinctive way by a Jewish community.

Ladino (Judezmo) *Judeo Spanish*

The language of Ottoman Sephardic Jews, from medieval Spanish.

Haketia *Judeo Spanish*

The Judeo Spanish of northern Morocco.

Judeo Arabic

Arabic as spoken and written by Jews, usually in Hebrew letters.

Rashi script

A Hebrew typeface used to print Ladino and other Jewish languages.

Solitreo *Judeo Spanish*

Cursive Hebrew handwriting used for Ladino.

Targum *Aramaic*

The Aramaic translation of the Bible.

Diglossia

Using two languages for different purposes, such as Hebrew for prayer and Judeo Arabic at home.

Heritage words

Words from an ancestral language that families keep using.

Endangered language

A language at risk of disappearing, usually because fewer children learn it at home.

Bringing the languages to life

In the public school classroom

- Create a “language journey” map tracing how these languages traveled with families from Spain, Iraq, Iran, and Central Asia to new homes.
- Connect to students' own lives: invite them to collect heritage words from their families' languages, in any language.
- Listen to music in Ladino and Judeo Arabic, and discuss how songs keep languages alive.
- Explore language endangerment as a global issue, comparing Jewish languages with Indigenous and other minority languages.
- Discuss prayers such as the Kaddish as texts, without having students recite them.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Use the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit's “Beyond the Family Tree” lessons, created with the Jewish Language Project.
- Teach students to write their names in Solitreo or Rashi script.
- Celebrate International Ladino Day, or sing Haggadah passages in Judeo Arabic or Ladino at a model seder.
- Invite grandparents to teach a song, a blessing for the cook, or a proverb.

At home and with family

- Make a family list of heritage words, with their meanings and who used them.
- Record grandparents speaking, singing, or telling a story in their language.
- Label family recipes with their original names.
- Explore the Jewish Language Project's Heirloom program to learn with a mentor.

Questions for discussion

- What can the words a community uses tell us about its history and its neighbors?
- Why might a family stop speaking its language after moving to a new country? What is gained, and what is lost?
- Is a language “alive” if people only know its songs and a few words? Why or why not?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Multilingual Passover: Conversation with Dr. Sarah Bunin Benor (JIMENA, with music, 69 minutes)
youtube.com/watch?v=lb4MWCz6a0

Ashtidek: Preserving the Beauty of Judeo Arabic with Sarah Sassoon (Jewish Language Project, 49 minutes)
youtube.com/watch?v=6uGkyS_45CM

Intro to Jewish Languages, by Sarah Bunin Benor (Jewish Language Project, 13 minutes)
youtube.com/watch?v=KPFJCEuULPo

Read

Shoham's Bangle, by Sarah Sassoon, illustrated by Noa Kelner (Kar-Ben, 2022). Picture book about an Iraqi Jewish family's journey to Israel.
sydneytaylorshmoose.com/2022/08/review-shohams-bangle.html

Tía Fortuna's New Home: A Jewish Cuban Journey, by Ruth Behar (Knopf, 2022). Picture book with Ladino woven through.
penguinrandomhouse.com/books/622815/tia-fortunas-new-home-by-ruth-behar-illustrated-by-devon-holzwarth

My Father's Paradise, by Ariel Sabar (Algonquin, 2008). A son's search for his Kurdish Jewish family's past and their Aramaic language.
publishersweekly.com/9781565124905

Handbook of Jewish Languages, edited by Lily Kahn and Aaron D. Rubin (Brill, 2017). Scholarly reference.
pure.psu.edu/en/publications/handbook-of-jewish-languages-revised-and-updated-edition

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"The Poetry of Exile and Return," by Sarah Sassoon Medieval Sephardic poetry and its Ladino translation.
distinctionsjournal.org/the-poetry-of-exile-and-return

"They Found, then Lost, their Espanya in the Tropics," by Ruth Behar Ladino speaking Sephardic Jews in Cuba.
distinctionsjournal.org/they-found-then-lost-their-espanya-in-the-tropics

"Sephardic Legacy Reawakens at Every Corner," by Nesim Bencoya Ladino heritage in Izmir, Turkey.
distinctionsjournal.org/sephardic-legacy-reawakens-at-every-corner

"Telling Silent Mizrahi Stories," by Sarah Sassoon The story behind *Shoham's Bangle*.
distinctionsjournal.org/shohams-bangle

Explore online

Jewish Language Project (HUC-JIR). Start here for every language in this explainer:
jewishlanguages.org

Judeo Spanish (Ladino)
jewishlanguages.org/judeo-spanish-judezmo-ladino

Judeo Arabic
jewishlanguages.org/judeo-arabic

Judeo Persian
jewishlanguages.org/judeo-persian

Jewish Neo Aramaic
jewishlanguages.org/jewish-aramaic

Heirloom: learn with a mentor (Jewish Language Project)
jewishlanguages.org/heirloom

Sephardic Studies Digital Collection (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/sephardic-studies-digital-library-museum

Soletreo Lessons from My Great-Grandfather (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/soletreo-lessons-from-my-great-grandfather

Judeo Spanish (Endangered Language Alliance)
elalliance.org/languages/judeo-spanish

The Jewish Life of Aramaic (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/the-jewish-life-of-aramaic

From JIMENA

Beyond the Family Tree: Jewish languages lessons (Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit)
sepharditoolkit.org/jewish-language-project

Lesson: Language Spotlight, Ladino (PDF)
sepharditoolkit.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Lesson-5-Language-spotlight-Ladino.pdf

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States: national study
How culture, language, and memory shape identity today.
sephardicstudy.org/5-demographic-study-understanding-sephardic-and-mizrahi-identity



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.

Speaker estimates and most language facts come from the Jewish Language Project (HUC-JIR, edited by Dr. Sarah Bunin Benor). Other sources: Endangered Language Alliance; University of Washington; My Jewish Learning; Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit; HUC Heritage Words. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.