

LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND THOUGHT

Healing and Medicine

Court physicians, translators, and grandmothers with healing words: how Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews cared for the body and the spirit for more than a thousand years.

LEARNED MEDICINE

Jewish physicians in Kairouan, Córdoba, Cairo, and Istanbul served rulers and ordinary patients and wrote medical books in Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin.

A SHARED SCIENCE

Jewish, Muslim, and Christian doctors studied the same Greek and Arabic medical tradition, and Jewish translators helped carry it between languages.

HEALING AT HOME

In many Sephardic families, women cared for the sick with herbs, oil, sugar, blessings, and special healing words.

FOR STUDY ONLY

The remedies described here are part of cultural history. They are not health advice.

For centuries, some of the most respected doctors in the Islamic world and in Spain were Jews. They treated caliphs and sultans, ran busy clinics, and wrote medical books that were read across the Mediterranean world and in Latin Europe. Alongside this learned medicine lived another tradition, carried mostly by women at home: remedies, blessings, and protective customs passed from grandmother to granddaughter. Together these two traditions show how Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews understood health as a matter of body, mind, and spirit, and how much they shared with their Muslim and Christian neighbors.

Physicians, scholars, and translators

Isaac Israeli (about 855 to 955)

He spent the first half of his life in Egypt, then moved to Kairouan, in today's Tunisia, around 905 and became physician to Ubayd Allah al Mahdi, founder of the Fatimid dynasty. His *Book of Fevers*, *Book of Foodstuffs and Drugs*, and *Book of Urine* were translated into Latin in the eleventh century by Constantine the African of the Salerno medical school and read in Europe.

Source: Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Hasdai ibn Shaprut (about 915 to 975)

Court physician to the caliph Abd al Rahman III in Córdoba, he became so trusted that he acted as an unofficial minister and diplomat. He helped translate into Arabic a famous Greek book on medicinal plants by Dioscorides, a gift from the Byzantine emperor, and supported the Hebrew poets and grammarians of his day.

Source: Encyclopædia Britannica

Maimonides, the Rambam (1130s to 1204)

Born in Córdoba, he settled in Fustat (Old Cairo), where he served as physician to al Qadi al Fadil, a leading official of the sultan Saladin, and later to Saladin's son al Afdal. He wrote ten medical works in Arabic, including *Medical Aphorisms*, about 1,500 short teachings in 25 chapters, a treatise on poisons, and a glossary of drug names.

Sources: Fred Rosner, National Library of Medicine (NIH); My Jewish Learning

Joseph and Moses Hamon

Joseph Hamon left Granada after the expulsion of 1492 and became physician to the Ottoman sultans Bayezid II and Selim I. His son Moses (about 1490 to 1554) served Suleiman the Magnificent as doctor, adviser, and diplomat. He wrote medical works, including one on dental care, owned a precious ancient manuscript of Dioscorides now in Vienna, and used his influence to protect Jews from false accusations.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Judaica (Encyclopedia.com); National Library of Israel

Amatus Lusitanus (1511 to 1568)

Born in Castelo Branco, Portugal, to a family forced to hide its Judaism, he earned his medical degree at Salamanca and practiced in Antwerp and Italy, where he lectured on anatomy and medicinal plants. Forced to flee Italy under Pope Paul IV, he eventually reached Salonica in the Ottoman Empire and lived openly as a Jew. His *Centuriae*, seven books of one hundred case histories each, include a physician's oath sworn "by the Eternal God."

Sources: Posen Library; Jewish Encyclopedia

Prescriptions in the Cairo Genizah

The storeroom of Cairo's Ben Ezra Synagogue preserved about 350,000 manuscript fragments. Nearly 2,000 pages deal with medicine: prescriptions, doctors' notes, and lists of drugs, mostly from the tenth to thirteenth centuries, in Hebrew, Arabic, and Judeo Arabic. One is a medical recipe in Maimonides' own hand.

Source: Cambridge University Library

Translators. Jewish scholars helped carry medical and scientific knowledge from Greek and Arabic into Hebrew and Latin. Judah ibn Tibbon, a physician from Granada, settled in Lunel in southern France and taught his sons the art of translation, founding a famous family of translators. Maimonides' own medical advice was later translated into Hebrew and sometimes Latin and read by Jewish and Christian doctors.

A doctor's advice for a healthy life

Medicine in Maimonides' time followed the Greek physician Galen and the theory of four bodily "humors." Doctors tried to keep them in balance through diet, sleep, exercise, and medicines.

Around 1198, Maimonides wrote *On the Regimen of Health* in Arabic for al Afdal, who suffered from indigestion and low spirits. He called exercise "the cornerstone of the conservation of health," advised eating only when truly hungry, recommended treating first through diet and then with simple remedies, and urged doctors to pay attention to a patient's emotions and to encourage cheerfulness. In his code of Jewish law, the *Mishneh Torah*, he also described a healthy way of life for every Jew, built on moderation, the "middle path."

He linked body and soul as well, comparing extremes of character to illnesses that need a cure.

A doctor's long day

In a letter of 1199 to the translator Samuel ibn Tibbon, Maimonides described his routine. Each morning he went from Fustat to attend the sultan in Cairo. When he came home, he found a crowd of patients waiting for him, and he treated them until two hours or more after nightfall.

He ate only one light meal a day.

Healing at home

Women's healing lore. In the Sephardic communities of the former Ottoman Empire, women performed rituals at home to prevent and cure illness, alongside the prayers men led in the synagogue. Scholars Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt interviewed elders from Turkey, Greece, the former Yugoslavia, Israel, and the United States. People believed illness could have a hidden cause, such as a careless word or thought, a fright (*espanto*), or the evil eye (*mal ojo*), and that healing meant finding that cause. Remedies used herbs, oil, and sugar, and the authors' book speaks of "sweetening the spirits."

Healing words. A healer might recite a *prekante*, a ritual prayer for curing. In Sarajevo, researchers have collected women's healing incantations, set formulas found across Sephardic communities with parallels among Iberian Christians and Ottoman Muslims and Christians.

Protection. Ottoman Sephardic families used *ruda*, the rue plant, to ward off the evil eye. In Iraq, Jews wore amulets and kept books of amulets, protective remedies (*segulot*), and prescriptions; a 1922 silver amulet from Iraq asks the sage Rabbi Meir Baal HaNes to guard its wearer. To learn more, see JIMENA's explainer *The Hamsa and Protective Customs*.

A note on historical remedies

The remedies, beliefs, and healing words in this explainer are shared for cultural and historical study only. They are not medical advice, and they should not be used to treat any illness. Medical understanding has changed greatly since these customs began.

What these traditions tell us is how families cared for one another, gave comfort in frightening times, and kept language and memory alive. For questions about health, consult a doctor.

Into the modern era

In the twentieth century, some Jewish communities in the region built modern medical institutions. In Baghdad, the Iraqi Jewish Archive preserves community records about the city's Jewish Hospital from 1921 to 1948, written in Judeo Arabic, French, and other languages, including a 1933 letter from a German Jewish doctor who hoped to move to Baghdad. Other papers concern the endowments that supported the Meir Elias Hospital.

Letters from teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the French Jewish school network, describe health and illness in the provincial cities of Iran from 1900 to 1950. Historian Isabelle Headrick notes that these letters rarely acknowledge the Iranians who were also working on medical care and public hygiene.

Many families carried both traditions with them when they left: trust in modern doctors, and a grandmother's blessing for a sick child.

Common misconceptions

- **"Jewish medicine was separate."** Jewish doctors shared one medical science with Muslim and Christian colleagues and often wrote in Arabic for Muslim patients.
- **"Maimonides was Saladin's personal doctor."** He served Saladin's leading official, al Fadil, and later Saladin's son al Afdal.
- **"Home healing was only superstition."** Scholars see it as a whole system of care, speech, and family ties.
- **"These remedies still work."** They are history to study, not treatments to try.

Words to know

Humors

The four bodily fluids that medieval doctors believed had to stay in balance.

Regimen of Health *Arabic: Fi tadbir al sihha*
Maimonides' health guide for Saladin's son.

Consilia *Latin*

Short letters of medical advice for a particular patient.

Genizah *Hebrew*

A storeroom for worn texts. Cairo's preserved nearly 2,000 medical pages.

Mal ojo *Ladino*

The evil eye, believed to cause illness.

Espanto *Ladino*

Fright, believed to make a person ill.

Prekante *Ladino*

A ritual prayer for curing, recited by a healer.

Ruda *Ladino*

Rue, a fragrant plant used to ward off the evil eye.

Segulot *Hebrew*

Protective or healing customs and remedies.

Kame'a *Hebrew*

An amulet, often a written blessing worn for protection.

Bringing the history of healing to life

In the public school classroom	In Jewish schools and communities	At home and with family
• Teach medieval medicine as a shared Mediterranean science, comparing Jewish, Muslim, and Christian physicians. • Read short excerpts of Maimonides' advice on exercise and diet and compare them with modern health guidance. • Map the journeys of Hasdai, Maimonides, the Hamons, and Amatus Lusitanus. • Present folk remedies and healing words as beliefs people held. Do not have students recite incantations or try remedies.	• Pair Maimonides' health chapters in the <i>Mishneh Torah</i> with the prayers for healing in the prayer book. • Invite community doctors and nurses to talk about the Jewish value of caring for the sick. • Collect the blessings and sayings for health that families remember in Ladino, Judeo Arabic, and Persian. • Explore the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for lessons on sages and heritage.	• Ask elders: What did your family do when someone was sick? Who was the healer? • Write down the blessings and phrases relatives said to a sick child. • Look for family doctors, nurses, and pharmacists in your family tree. • Record these memories and share them with JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might rulers of different faiths have trusted Jewish doctors with their health?
- How did translators help knowledge travel between cultures, and what might be lost in translation?
- What can home healing customs teach us about family, language, and care, even when we no longer use them?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Maimonides and Medicine (Center for Jewish History and Yeshiva University Museum, 2024, 94 minutes). For teachers.
youtube.com/watch?v=GG6onWNhALo

Classes and Education video collection (JIMENA)
jimena.org/videos/classes-and-education

Read

Ritual Medical Lore of Sephardic Women: Sweetening the Spirits, Healing the Sick, by Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt (University of Illinois Press, 2002). For teachers.
press.uillinois.edu/books/?id=c026973

Maimonides, by Sherwin B. Nuland (Schocken, 2005). A surgeon's short biography.
kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/sherwin-b-nuland/maimonides

Maimonides: Life and Thought, by Moshe Halbertal (Princeton University Press, 2014).
cris.huji.ac.il/en/publications/maimonides-life-and-thought-2

"Moses Maimonides: Biographic Outlines," by Fred Rosner (*Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal*, 2010, via the National Library of Medicine).
pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3721660

Explore online

Maimonides' Medical Writings (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/maimonides-medical-writings

On the Regimen of Health (Posen Library, excerpt)
posenlibrary.com/node/12882

Amatus Lusitanus (Posen Library)
posenlibrary.com/node/4643

Isaac Israeli (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)
plato.stanford.edu/ENTRIES/israeli

Hisdai ibn Shaprut (Encyclopædia Britannica)
britannica.com/print/article/266918

Hamon family (Encyclopaedia Judaica, via Encyclopedia.com)
encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/hamon

Five Hundred Years in the Life of the Amon Family (National Library of Israel)
blog.nli.org.il/en/lbh-amon

Medicine in Medieval Egypt (Cambridge University Library, Genizah Research Unit)
lib.cam.ac.uk/node/49012

Ruda (rue) (Jewish English Lexicon)
jel.jewish-languages.org/words/6202

Records of the Jewish Hospital in Baghdad (Iraqi Jewish Archive, U.S. National Archives)
archives.gov/exhibits/ija/node/3396

From JIMENA

Cultural Heritage Series, including *The Hamsa and Protective Customs*
jimena.org/cultural-heritage

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

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 Fred Rosner (*Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal*, National Library of Medicine); Maud Kozodoy (My Jewish Learning); the Posen Library; the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy; Encyclopædia Britannica; the Encyclopaedia Judaica and Jewish Encyclopedia; the National Library of Israel; Cambridge University Library; Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt (University of Illinois Press); Tamar Aleksander and Eliezer Papo (*Menorah*, 2011); the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center; the Jewish English Lexicon; the Iraqi Jewish Archive; Isabelle Headrick (*Iranian Studies*, 2023); and the Center for Jewish History. Historical remedies are described for cultural study only and are not health advice. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.