

LIFECYCLE AND CUSTOMS

Mourning and Remembrance

How Sephardic and Mizrahi families care for the dead, comfort mourners, and keep the memory of loved ones alive through prayer, study, food, and community.

WHAT IT IS

A set of customs that guide a family from the moment of a death through the funeral, the first week, the first month, and the first year.

AT THE HEART

Caring for the person who died, surrounding mourners with community, and remembering through prayer, learning, and acts of kindness.

DISTINCTIVE CUSTOMS

The *hashkava* memorial prayer, the Ladino *meldado* study gathering, round foods of consolation, and visits to the cemetery.

TODAY

Families in Israel, the United States, and around the world keep these customs, often blending the traditions of several communities.

Every culture has ways of saying goodbye. Jewish tradition sees the time after a death as a journey in stages, each with its own customs, that slowly leads mourners back into everyday life. Sephardic and Mizrahi communities share this framework with Jews everywhere, and over centuries in the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, the Middle East, Iran, and Central Asia they shaped it with their own prayers, melodies, foods, and words. Many of these customs, from the Ladino *meldado* to the sweet raisins on a table of consolation, carry a gentle message: the community will not leave a grieving family alone.

The path of mourning

- **Before the funeral.** Members of the *hevra kadisha*, a volunteer burial society, prepare the body with *tahara*, a ritual washing, and dress it in simple shrouds.
- **The funeral.** In Sephardic tradition, the *hashkava* prayer is recited at the grave, and mourners say a special Kaddish heard only at a burial. Everyone washes their hands before leaving the cemetery.
- **Shiva, the seven days.** Called the *siete* in Ladino. Mourners stay at home, sit on low seats, and receive visitors. Mirrors are often covered and a candle burns for the week. Friends bring meals and join daily prayers in the house.
- **Sheloshim, the thirty days.** Mourners return to work but avoid celebrations and new clothes. For most relatives, mourning ends here.
- **The year.** For a parent, mourning lasts twelve months, and children traditionally recite the Mourner's Kaddish, an Aramaic prayer said with a group of ten, for eleven months.
- **Each anniversary.** Families mark the yearly date of the death with prayer, study, charity, and often a visit to the grave.

The hashkava: "laying to rest"

The *hashkava* (also spelled *hashkaba*) is the Sephardic memorial prayer. It asks that the soul of the person who died find rest and mercy under the wings of the Divine Presence. It is said at the graveside, and in the synagogue on Shabbat and holidays, often when a mourner is called to the Torah.

Women are remembered with a version that opens with "A woman of valor" from Proverbs 31. On the eve of Yom Kippur, many Sephardic synagogues read the names of departed members aloud. The Ashkenazi prayer *El Male Rahamim* is a close cousin.

Customs of memory

The meldado (Ottoman Sephardim)

From the Ladino word *meldar*, "to read" or "to study," a *meldado* is a gathering to learn in memory of the dead. In the first year it could be held up to six times, including at thirty days, at seven, nine, and eleven months, and at the year, *el anyo*. Mourners chose psalms and passages of the Mishna whose first letters spell the name of the person who died. Once held at home with a shared meal, most *meldados* moved to synagogues in the twentieth century.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

A table of consolation

The first meal after the funeral, the *seudat havra'a*, is prepared by others, so mourners do not have to care for themselves. Round foods recall the circle of life. A medieval commentator, Rashi, explained that eggs are round and have no mouth, like mourners who find it hard to speak. Some communities also serve lentils. Ladino speaking families set out sweet rolls, *huevos haminados* (slow cooked eggs), olives, and raisins, *pasas*, a play on the saying *i esto va pasar*, "this, too, shall pass."

Sources: University of Washington; Rabbi Yosef Bitton; Hebrew Free Burial Association

Tables across the Middle East

Customs vary from home to home. Accounts describe Persian Jews serving *kuku sabzi*, a fresh herb frittata, and Iraqi Jews reciting blessings over fruits and vegetables rather than bread. Mizrahi families may offer ring shaped *ka'ak* bread, Egyptian Jews a lentil and rice dish, Yemenite families a bowl of soup, and Bukharan families a full meal with dessert. In many Sephardic and Mizrahi homes, mourners eat together with their visitors.

Sources: Hebrew Free Burial Association (2021); Detroit Jewish News (2023)

Salonica: a shared city

In Salonica, home to Jews, Muslims, and Christians, a Jewish resident later recalled how much Jewish and Muslim funeral processions resembled one another. Funerals of wealthy families could include many rabbis, musicians, and a children's choir. Families sometimes hired *planaderas*, professional mourners who sang laments and elegies to music.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

The bedahey, a "house of life"

Ladino speakers called the cemetery the *bedahey*, from the Hebrew *bet hahayim*, "house of life." It was a place of hope, not fear. Children visited parents' graves to share their troubles, and expectant mothers came to pray for a healthy birth. Annual grave visits, called *ziyara*, were a custom shared with Muslim neighbors.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

Seattle: carrying customs to America

When Rabbi Avraham Maimon died in 1924, his funeral procession moved through Seattle's Sephardic neighborhood, and schoolchildren took part holding candles tied with black ribbons. Today, Sephardic Bikur Holim makes its *ziyara* on the Sunday between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and Ezra Bessaroth visits the cemetery before the fall and spring holidays.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

Rising from shiva

Rabbi Yosef Bitton describes a common Sephardic custom: on the eve of the seventh day, family and friends gather for Torah study and words of remembrance, followed by a meal once given to the poor. In his community it is called the *haft*, Persian for "seven." The next morning, mourners visit the grave, recite the hashkava, and then rise from shiva.

Source: Rabbi Yosef Bitton, Halakha of the Day

Many names for remembering

The yearly anniversary has many names. Ashkenazi Jews say *yahrzeit*, a word some Ladino speakers adopted too. Others say *meldado* or *anyo*, and some Sephardic families use the Hebrew *azkara*, "remembrance."

Sources: University of Washington; Sephardic U

Change and continuity

From home to synagogue. In the Ottoman Empire, families held the *meldado* at home around a shared meal. By the twentieth century, in Seattle as elsewhere, most had moved into synagogues. Louise Azose of Seattle missed the old way. "They come, they say a few words as a *meldado*, boom, everybody goes home," she said. For her, losing the meal meant losing the feeling of remembering together.

Blending words and ways. Communities learned from their neighbors. Some Ladino speakers adopted the Yiddish word *yahrzeit* for the anniversary of a death. In the Ottoman world, grave visits echoed customs of Muslim neighbors.

Carried by memory. Many life cycle customs were passed down by word of mouth, often by women. As fewer families spoke Ladino, some customs faded, while others survived. Asking elders how a family mourned, and recording their answers, helps keep these traditions alive.

Common misconceptions

- **"Jewish mourning customs are the same everywhere."** The basic stages are shared, but prayers, melodies, foods, and terms differ from community to community.
- **"The Kaddish is a prayer about death."** Only the special Kaddish said at a burial speaks of death and resurrection. The familiar Mourner's Kaddish does not mention death at all.
- **"Remembrance happens once a year."** Ladino speaking Sephardim could gather for a *meldado* up to six times in the first year.
- **"Cemeteries were places to avoid."** For many Sephardic families, the cemetery was a "house of life," visited with children and in times of hope.

Words to know

Hashkava *Hebrew*

"Laying to rest." The Sephardic memorial prayer.

Meldado *Ladino*

A memorial gathering for study and prayer, from *meldar*, "to read."

Anyo *Ladino*

"Year." The anniversary of a death.

Siete *Ladino*

"Seven." The seven days of mourning, called *shiva* in Hebrew.

Sheloshim *Hebrew*

"Thirty." The first thirty days of mourning.

Seudat havra'a *Hebrew*

The meal of consolation prepared for mourners.

Kaddish *Aramaic*

An Aramaic prayer recited by mourners with a group of ten.

Hevra kadisha *Hebrew*

"Holy society." The volunteer burial society.

Tahara *Hebrew*

"Purification." The ritual washing of the body before burial.

Bedahey *Ladino*

The cemetery, from Hebrew for "house of life."

Teaching about loss with care

In the public school classroom

- Before teaching, remember that some students may be grieving. Give advance notice, offer a quiet alternative, and never ask students to share personal losses.
- Teach about customs as culture and history, and compare how many traditions comfort mourners with food, visits, and memory.
- Explore the shared world of Salonica, where Jewish and Muslim funeral processions looked much alike, as an example of neighbors influencing one another.
- Use primary sources, such as the photographs and documents in the University of Washington exhibit.
- Do not reenact funerals, shiva, or a meldado, and do not have students recite the Kaddish, the hashkava, or other prayers.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Invite a rabbi or hazzan to explain the hashkava and play recordings of community melodies.
- Study the meldado and its custom of learning texts that spell a loved one's name.
- Prepare a meal or tray for a mourning family as a class act of kindness.
- With older students, learn about the volunteer work of the hevra kadisha and why communities hold it in such high honor.
- Explore the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for heritage across the school year.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives what your family calls the anniversary of a death, and how it is marked.
- Look through old prayer books for names and dates recorded inside the covers.
- Share a favorite story or recipe of someone you miss.
- When visiting relatives' graves, tell children about the people buried there, so names become stories.
- Record an elder's memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might so many cultures bring food to people who are grieving?
- What does it mean to call a cemetery a "house of life"? How might that change the way people feel about visiting?
- Many communities remember loved ones through study, charity, or kindness. What are meaningful ways to keep someone's memory alive?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Sephardic Jews and the Holocaust, with Dr. Devin Naar (JIMENA, 2023). On remembering lost Sephardic communities. For older students and adults.

youtube.com/watch?v=klrctvJFbE8

JIMENA Oral History Project (Family memories in their own voices)
jimena.org/oral-history

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

Read

Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture, by Matthias B. Lehmann (Indiana University Press, 2005). For teachers; cited in the University of Washington meldado essay.
jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs/meldado-jewish-memorial-services

A Time to Weep, by Morris Scharhon, edited by Alan Scharhon A guide to bereavement based on the customs of Seattle's Sephardic community.
jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs/meldado-jewish-memorial-services

Explore online

Exploring Sephardic Life Cycle Customs (University of Washington digital exhibit)

jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs

Meldado: Jewish Memorial Services (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs/meldado-jewish-memorial-services

Levaya i Bedahey: Processions and the Cemetery (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs/levaya-i-bedahey-processions-life-cycle-cemetery

Hashkabah (Jewish Encyclopedia, 1906)
jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/7311-hashkabah

Ashkavah (Encyclopaedia Judaica, via Jewish Virtual Library)
jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ashkavah

The Dishes We Serve Mourners (Hebrew Free Burial Association newsletter, 2021)
hebrewfreeburial.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Chesed_Rev-1.pdf

The House of Mourning (Rabbi Yosef Bitton, Halakha of the Day)
halakhaoftheday.org/2020/11/15/the-house-of-mourning-bet-haabel

The End of the Seven Days of Mourning (Rabbi Yosef Bitton, Halakha of the Day)
halakhaoftheday.org/2021/01/18/the-end-of-the-seven-days-of-mourning

From JIMENA

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)
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 the University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies exhibit *Exploring Sephardic Life Cycle Customs*; the Jewish Encyclopedia; the Encyclopaedia Judaica; Rabbi Yosef Bitton, Halakha of the Day; the Hebrew Free Burial Association; the Detroit Jewish News; and Sephardic U. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.