

LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND THOUGHT

Sephardic Approaches to Teaching and Learning

From the neighborhood *heder* and the great study houses of Baghdad to family songs and today's classrooms: how Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews have passed knowledge from one generation to the next.

LEARNING BY VOICE

Children learned to read sacred texts aloud, by chanting and memorizing. In Yemen, some began as young as age three.

TEACHERS AND SAGES

The *hakham*, or sage, was a teacher, judge, and guide whose writing spoke to ordinary people as well as scholars.

TORAH AND THE WORLD

A long Sephardic ideal holds that Jewish learning and general knowledge belong together.

TODAY

Educators are weaving Sephardic and Mizrahi texts, history, and voices into Jewish and public school classrooms.

For Jews of the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sephardic world, learning was never confined to a classroom. Children chanted their first Hebrew verses in small neighborhood schools, older students studied with renowned sages, families sang poems that carried the musical and spiritual heritage of their community, and grandmothers taught tradition at the kitchen table. Over the centuries these communities also built rabbinical colleges whose graduates served communities far and wide, embraced the study of science and poetry, and in the modern era opened their doors to new kinds of schools. Their story offers today's teachers a rich model of learning that is communal, musical, and open to the world.

How knowledge was passed on

- **School from an early age.** Boys typically began with the Hebrew alphabet in a small school, often called a *heder*, attached to a synagogue or held in a teacher's home. Yemenite children could begin learning to read at age three.
- **Reading aloud and by heart.** In Yemenite schools, for example, students read sacred texts aloud and memorized them, trusting that deeper understanding would follow once they could read accurately.
- **Learning with a sage.** Advanced students sought out a *hakham* and, in medieval times, often traveled to study each subject with a specialist.
- **Learning through song.** Poems, prayers, and the chanted melodies of Torah reading taught Hebrew, values, and music all at once.
- **Learning at home.** Formal schooling was mostly for boys. Mothers and grandmothers taught daughters, and whole families, through songs, stories, food, and holiday customs.

The tree and the web

Scholar Vanessa Paloma Elbaz describes two paths of Sephardic transmission after 1492.

The tree is the orderly line of teacher to student, through synagogues and study halls. **The web** spreads sideways through homes, gatherings, and women's songs, without one center.

She stresses that neither path belongs to one gender, and that tradition is strongest where the two meet. She calls the whole system "Sontinuity," continuity carried by sound.

Key approaches and institutions

The neighborhood school

Children learned in a synagogue school or a teacher's home, starting with the alphabet and then letters with vowels. Cairo Geniza documents even preserve outlines of letters for children to color in.

In Yemen, a teacher called a *mori* taught young boys. In southern Morocco, a boy's first day of school, *Liktahb*, was marked with a symbolic "wedding" to the Torah.

Sources: Norman Roth, *My Jewish Learning*; College of Charleston; National Library of Israel

The hakham as teacher

The *hakham* taught, ruled on Jewish law, and guided the community. Rabbi Yosef Haim of Baghdad, known as the Ben Ish Hai, wrote sermons and rulings meant for broad audiences, not only scholars.

Educator Tamar Zaken highlights sages who saw Jewish law as a way to improve people, such as the Ben Ish Hai's concern for the dignity of the poor.

Source: Tamar Zaken, *Distinctions* (2025)

Midrash Bet Zilkha, Baghdad

Founded in 1840 and long led by Hakham Abdallah Somekh, the most prominent Baghdad rabbi of the nineteenth century, this rabbinical college trained generations of scholars. Its graduates served as rabbis in many communities.

Baghdad's Jewish schools later served thousands of students, with more than 13,000 pupils in 1950, before the community's mass departure in 1950 and 1951.

Source: Encyclopaedia Judaica, "Baghdad" (Jewish Virtual Library)

Torah and the wider world

In medieval Muslim Spain and Egypt, advanced students studied Bible and Talmud alongside mathematics, astronomy, medicine, philosophy, and, in Spain, Hebrew and Arabic poetry. Boys learned Arabic early, sometimes alongside Muslim boys.

Around 1160 to 1180, Judah ibn Tibbon urged his son to study Torah and medicine and to care for the family's large library of Hebrew and Arabic books.

Sources: Norman Roth, *My Jewish Learning*; Fordham University

Learning through song

Syrian Jews learn *pizmonim*, religious songs sung at prayers and celebrations, and assign each week's prayers a musical mode, or *maqam*, matched to the Torah portion.

In Aleppo, Morocco, and Jerusalem, communities gather very early on winter Sabbath mornings to sing poems called *baqashot*.

Sources: Pizmonim.org; Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre

Women's transmission at home

Little is known about girls' schooling in earlier centuries; in Yemen, for example, mothers taught their daughters at home. Scholar Vanessa Paloma Elbaz shows how women's songs carried tradition. In medieval Spain, some women hired teachers and endowed schools.

Sources: Vanessa Paloma Elbaz, *Distinctions*; Norman Roth, *My Jewish Learning*

Alliance Israélite Universelle

Founded in Paris in 1860, the Alliance opened its first school in Tetuan, Morocco, in 1862, followed by Baghdad (1865) and Tehran (1898). By 1914 it ran 183 schools in 90 cities, teaching French, Hebrew, and job skills, and educating girls as well as boys.

Some rabbis, including Baghdad's Hakham Shimon Agassi, worried it weakened Hebrew learning. Three Alliance schools in Casablanca still serve Jewish and Muslim children.

Sources: Alliance Israélite Universelle; Encyclopaedia Judaica; ANU Museum

Sephardic schooling in America

In Seattle, about 120 children from Ladino speaking families attended the Sephardic Talmud Torah, founded in 1933, after public school. Today at least half of Seattle Hebrew Academy's students come from Sephardic families.

Source: Ty Alhadeff, *Distinctions* (2025)

Sephardic heritage in today's classrooms

JIMENA's Toolkit. The Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit, launched in 2024 and designed mainly for Jewish day schools, helps schools include families of every Jewish background and give all students a broader picture of Jewish life worldwide. It holds that inclusion should run through all of school life, takes the whole community, and benefits everyone. It offers guidance for school leaders, teachers, and families, plus subject pages for teaching across the curriculum.

Voices from *Distinctions*. In JIMENA's 2025 education issue, educators including Denise Zami Samstein, Elana Riback Rand, and Stephanie Ives explore how schools can help Sephardic and Mizrahi students feel they belong and why Sephardic customs enrich every school. Sarah Sassoon and Etan Basseri show how picture books help children see their own traditions.

Common misconceptions

- **"Sephardic learning was only religious."** Many communities prized science, medicine, and poetry alongside Torah.
- **"Girls learned nothing."** Formal schooling was mostly for boys, but women were central teachers of tradition at home, and Alliance schools educated girls.
- **"A heritage day is enough."** The Toolkit recommends weaving Sephardic content into the regular curriculum all year.
- **"Only schools with Sephardic students need this."** Without it, every student gets an incomplete picture of Jewish history.

Words to know

Hakham (haham) *Hebrew*

"Sage," the title for a rabbi in many Sephardic and Mizrahi communities.

Heder *Hebrew*

A small traditional school where young children learned to read Hebrew.

Mori *Yemenite Jewish usage*

A Yemenite Jewish teacher; a "children's mori" taught young boys to read.

Kuttab *Arabic*

The traditional elementary school of the Muslim world.

Cantillation (te'amim) *Hebrew*

The chanted melody for reading the Bible aloud, marked by small signs.

Yeshiva (plural yeshivot) *Hebrew*

An academy for advanced study of Talmud and Jewish law.

Pizmonim *Hebrew*

Religious songs of the Syrian Jewish tradition, sung at prayers and celebrations.

Maqam *Arabic*

A musical mode in Middle Eastern music, used to organize prayers and songs.

Baqashot *Hebrew*

"Requests," poems sung before dawn on winter Sabbaths.

Minhag *Hebrew*

A community custom. Different minhagim can be equally valid.

Lessons for today's teachers

These traditions suggest habits any teacher can borrow:

- **Learn out loud and together.** Reading aloud, chanting, and singing together were at the heart of traditional learning.
- **Let music carry meaning.** Songs helped children remember language, history, and values. A melody can still anchor a lesson.
- **Make families partners.** Much of this heritage lives at home, in recipes, stories, and lullabies. Invite families to share it.
- **Connect learning to the wider world.** The Sephardic ideal joined sacred study with science, languages, and poetry.
- **Lead with respect.** Tamar Zaken's lessons on Sephardic sages stress that learning should make people better, and that respect and connection come first.

A first day to remember

In many Jewish communities, a child's first day of school was a celebration. In the Tafilat region of southern Morocco, a boy of about five was symbolically "married" to the Torah, sometimes with a parade and a festive dinner, to show his lifelong bond with learning.

Teachers today can borrow the spirit of this custom by marking the start of a new year or a new book with a small celebration.

Bringing these traditions to life

In the public school classroom

- Compare how children learned in a Yemenite heder, a medieval Cairo classroom, and an Alliance school with how students learn today.
- Read Judah ibn Tibbon's letter about caring for books as a primary source, then have students write their own advice about learning.
- Play recordings of pizmonim or baqashot and discuss how songs teach language and values. Listen and analyze; do not have students sing prayers.
- Explore the Alliance schools to discuss how modern education changed communities, including the debates it sparked.
- Have students interview a grandparent about how they learned as a child, in any culture.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Start the year by asking every student about their roots, as the Toolkit recommends.
- Hang portraits of Sephardic and Mizrahi sages, such as the Ben Ish Hai, beside other Jewish leaders, and stock Sephardic siddurim.
- Teach with Sephardic texts: try Zaken's lessons on the Ben Ish Hai's blessing for "new" secondhand things, or her lesson on Rav Yosef Messas.
- Audit your library for Sephardic and Mizrahi picture books, and use the Toolkit's subject pages to add one Sephardic text to every unit.

At home and with family

- Share where your family comes from through stories, recipes, and songs, and ask children what they learn at school.
- Record an elder singing a family song or lullaby, and share it with JIMENA's oral history project.
- Read picture books together and ask, "Do you see anything our family does?"
- On back to school night, notice whose faces and stories appear on classroom walls.

Questions for discussion

- What can a song, a recipe, or a story teach that a textbook cannot?
- Why might communities welcome a new kind of school, and why might some worry about it?
- How does seeing your own family's traditions in a classroom change how you feel about learning?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Sephardic Pedagogy with Adam Eilath (JIMENA, 2021)
vimeo.com/537101166

A Tour Through the Sephardi and Mizrahi Education Toolkit, Part 1 (JIMENA, 2024)
youtube.com/watch?v=VWCC-PP5MsQ

A Tour Through the Sephardi and Mizrahi Education Toolkit, Part 2 (JIMENA, 2024)
youtube.com/watch?v=szcZ33GBYi4

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

Read

Jews and Muslims: Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Modern Times, by **Aron Rodrigue** (University of Washington Press, 2003; first published 1993). Alliance teachers' letters from across the region.
catalog.nypl.org/search/i9780295983141

A Persian Passover, by **Etan Basseri**, illustrated by **Rashin Khairiyeh** (Kalaniot Books, 2022). Picture book about Passover in an Iranian Jewish family.
kalaniotbooks.com/persian-passover-a-hardcover

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

Explore online

Jewish Education in Muslim Lands, by **Norman Roth** (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/jewish-education-in-muslim-lands

Education and Teaching (Alliance Israélite Universelle online exhibit)
bibliotheque-numerique-aiu.org/en/exhibitions-us/exhibitions/81-education-and-teaching

A Father's Ethical Will: Judah ibn Tibbon (Fordham University Medieval Sourcebook)
sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/source/jewish-wills.asp

Baqqashah (Baqqashot) (Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre)
jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/content/baqqashah-pl-baqqashot

Rabbi Shimon Agassi's Letter Concerning the Alliance School (ANU Museum of the Jewish People)
index.anumuseum.org.il/exhibit/artifact-draft-of-rabbi-shimon-agassis-letter-concerning-the-alliance-school

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"Between Crusade and Jihad," by **Ty Alhadeff** Seattle's Sephardic schools.
distinctionsjournal.org/between-crusade-and-jihad-why-we-need-sephardi-education-more-than-ever

"A Library of Sages," by **Tamar Zaken** Lessons from Sephardic sages.
distinctionsjournal.org/a-library-of-sages-bringing-sephardi-wisdom-to-jewish-day-schools-2

"Residents and Strangers," by **Elana Riback Rand**
distinctionsjournal.org/?p=4065

"We Belong Here, Too," by **Denise Zami Samstein**
distinctionsjournal.org/we-belong-here-too-cultivating-sephardi-presence-in-jewish-education

"Modeling Authenticity," by **Stephanie Ives**
distinctionsjournal.org/modeling-authenticity-how-schools-can-integrate-diverse-jewish-voices

"Sontinuity: The Tree and the Web," by **Vanessa Paloma Elbaz**
distinctionsjournal.org/the-tree-and-the-web

"Telling Our Stories," by **Sarah Sassoon**
distinctionsjournal.org/telling-our-stories-a-new-generation-of-mizrahi-and-sephardi-literature

"Drawing Our Traditions into the Story," by **Etan Basseri**
distinctionsjournal.org/basseri

From JIMENA

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit: Our Mission
sepharditoolkit.org/our-mission

Toolkit: Recommendations for Classroom Teachers
sepharditoolkit.org/classroom-teachers

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 *Distinctions*, JIMENA's journal (Issue 5, Education, 2025); the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit; Norman Roth (My Jewish Learning); the Encyclopaedia Judaica via the Jewish Virtual Library; the Alliance Israélite Universelle; the ANU Museum of the Jewish People; the National Library of Israel; the Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre; the College of Charleston; the Fordham University Medieval Sourcebook; and Pizmonim.org. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.