

LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND THOUGHT

Poetry

From wine songs and war poems in medieval Spain to Ladino ballads, Persian epics, and today's Israeli and American poets: a thousand years of Sephardic and Mizrahi verse.

A GOLDEN AGE

In al Andalus, Jewish poets joined the meters of Arabic poetry with the language of the Hebrew Bible.

SACRED AND SECULAR

The same poet might write about wine, friendship, and battle, and also prayers still sung today.

MANY LANDS

Poetry flourished in Safed, Damascus, Yemen, Morocco, Persia, and the Ottoman Empire, in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Persian, and Ladino.

TODAY

Sephardic and Mizrahi poets write in Hebrew, English, and other languages, often in conversation with the medieval masters.

For Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, poetry was never only for books. Poems were sung at weddings and on the Sabbath, chanted in synagogue, traded between friends, and sung by women at their household work. A thousand years ago in Muslim Spain, Jewish courtiers wrote Hebrew poems in the style of the Arabic poetry around them. Later poets carried that art to Safed, Yemen, Morocco, and Persia, and Ladino speakers made their own rhymed songs and ballads. Today a new generation keeps writing, often answering the voices of the past.

The poetry of al Andalus

A new music for Hebrew. In the tenth century, Dunash ben Labrat, born, by one medieval account, in Fez to a family from Baghdad, and a student of Saadia Gaon, became the first to adapt an Arabic meter to Hebrew verse. Saadia is said to have marveled, "Such a thing has hitherto been unknown in Israel." Dunash settled in Córdoba, and his innovation shaped Hebrew poetry for centuries. A poem attributed to his wife, whose name we do not know, survives on a page from the Cairo Geniza: a woman's farewell to her departing husband, asking if he will remember her and their son.

Secular and sacred. Poets wrote about love, wine, gardens, friendship, and grief, and they praised their patrons. The same poets wrote *piyyutim* for the synagogue, drawing their language from the Hebrew Bible. Scholars note that these poets did not draw a sharp line between "secular" and "religious"; a poet's collected works, the *diwan*, held both.

How a muwashshah works

The *muwashshah* (in Hebrew, *shir ezor*, "girdle poem") was a strophic form first developed in al Andalus, with three to five stanzas.

Its final two lines, the *kharja*, were usually not in Hebrew but in the Romance vernacular (an early form of Spanish), Arabic, or a mix, and may have quoted popular songs. Scholars count the Romance *kharjas*, some from the eleventh century, among the oldest surviving lyric verses in a Romance language, which makes Hebrew and Arabic poems an important part of the story of European poetry.

Poets and forms

Shmuel HaNagid: the warrior poet

Vizier and army commander of Granada, HaNagid wrote poems from the battlefield about campaigns and victories of his own day, gathered in English in a section titled "After Psalms." He also wrote witty proverbs, elegies for his brother, and reflections on growing old.

Sources: Peter Cole, *Selected Poems of Shmuel HaNagid* (Publishers Weekly); Posen Library

Solomon ibn Gabirol

Born around 1022, Ibn Gabirol borrowed Arabic meters, rhymes, and imagery and wrote sharp satires of court life alongside devotional poems. His long poem *Keter Malkhut* ("Kingdom's Crown") appears in many prayer books for Yom Kippur.

Sources: Poetry Foundation; Princeton University Press

Moses ibn Ezra

Born in Granada around 1060, he fled to Christian Spain after the city fell to the Almoravids and spent the rest of his life in exile. He wrote secular poems, penitential poems (*selihot*) on death and the vanity of the world, and, in Arabic, an early book about how to write Hebrew poetry.

Source: Poetry Foundation

Yehuda HaLevi: Songs of Zion

HaLevi wrote love poems and wine songs, but he is best remembered for his poems of longing for Zion. In the most famous, his heart is in the East while he lives at the far edge of the West. In 1140 he set out for the Land of Israel.

Sources: Poetry Foundation; Posen Library; University of Rochester

Israel Najara: Safed and Damascus

Probably born in Damascus, Najara published *Zemiroth Yisrael* in Safed in 1587 with 109 poems; a later edition held 346. His Aramaic Sabbath song "Yah Ribbon Olam," with his name in an acrostic, is sung by Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews alike. Some rabbis criticized him for borrowing popular melodies.

Sources: Jewish Virtual Library; Milken Archive of Jewish Music

Shalom Shabazi: Yemen

The greatest poet of Yemenite Jewry wrote about 550 poems in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, often weaving his name into them as an acrostic. His themes include exile and redemption, the Sabbath, festivals, and weddings. Sarah Sassoon places his life alongside the Mawza exile of Yemen's Jews in 1679 and 1680.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jewish Virtual Library); Sarah Sassoon, *Distinctions*

David ben Hassine: Morocco

Born in Meknes, David ben Hassine (1727 to 1792) has been called the most celebrated poet of Moroccan Jewry. Communities as far away as Gibraltar invited him to sing his *piyyutim*, and his collection *Tehilla leDavid* was printed in Amsterdam in 1807.

Source: André E. Elbaz and Ephraim Hazan, *AJS Review*

Shahin and Imrani: Persian epics

Writing in Judeo Persian in the 1300s, the poet known as Shahin ("falcon") retold Genesis, the life of Moses, and the Book of Esther as long epics in rhymed couplets, the Persian *masnavi*. Imrani of Isfahan continued the tradition in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jewish Virtual Library); Posen Library; Jewish Language Project

Ladino koplás and romansas

Koplás are rhymed Ladino poems in stanzas, often with refrains or acrostics, first written by rabbis to teach holidays, history, and ethics; Purim koplás were the most famous. *Romansas* are narrative ballads from medieval Spain, in long lines split into two eight syllable halves, often sung by women at their household work.

Sources: University of Washington (Ty Alhadeff); Jewish Women's Archive (Judith R. Cohen)

Bridges across centuries

Emma Lazarus, of Portuguese Sephardic descent, translated Ibn Gabirol and HaLevi into English in the 1800s. Avraham Shemuel Recanati of Salonica translated HaLevi into Ladino, and Sarah Sassoon also writes about the Iranian rabbi and poet Yaghoub Rashti.

Source: Sarah Sassoon, "The Poetry of Exile and Return," *Distinctions*

Modern and contemporary voices

Erez Biton, born in 1942 in Oran, Algeria, to Moroccan parents, came to Israel as a small child and lost his sight at age ten. His first book, *Minkha Morokait (A Moroccan Offering)*, appeared in 1976. In 2015 he received the Israel Prize. Sarah Sassoon calls him the founding father of contemporary Mizrahi poetry.

Ronny Someck, born in Baghdad in 1951, writes about everyday life and memory, and his work has been translated into 22 languages. **Almog Behar**, whose family roots include Iraq, Turkey, and Germany, writes Hebrew poems threaded with Arabic and finds a model in the poets of Spain. **Sarah Sassoon**, a poet of Iraqi Jewish descent born in Australia and living in Israel, won first place in a prize for Jewish women writers for her chapbook *This is Why We Don't Look Back*. In New York, spoken word poet **Vanessa Hidary**, a descendant of Syrian Sephardim, performs as "the Hebrew Mamita."

Common misconceptions

- **"Medieval Hebrew poetry was all prayer."**
Poets of al Andalus also wrote about wine, love, friendship, and war.
- **"European lyric poetry began with the troubadours."** Scholars count Romance kharjas preserved in Hebrew and Arabic poems among the oldest Romance lyric verses.
- **"Sephardic poetry ended in 1492."** It continued in Safed, Yemen, Morocco, Persia, the Ottoman world, and today.
- **"Jewish poets wrote only in Hebrew."** They also wrote in Aramaic, Arabic, Judeo Persian, Ladino, and English.

Words to know

Diwan *Arabic*

A poet's collected poems; also the Yemenite Jewish songbook.

Meter

A regular pattern of long and short or stressed syllables in a line.

Muwashshah *Arabic*

A strophic "girdle poem" from al Andalus; in Hebrew, *shir ezor*.

Kharja *Arabic*

The closing lines of a muwashshah, often in Romance or Arabic.

Piyyut *Hebrew*

A liturgical poem, sung in or around the prayers.

Acrostic

A poem in which the first letters of lines spell a name or word.

Songs of Zion

Yehuda HaLevi's poems of longing for the Land of Israel.

Masnavi *Persian*

A long poem in rhymed couplets, used for epics.

Kopla *Ladino*

A rhymed poem in stanzas, often sung for a holiday.

Romansa *Ladino*

A narrative ballad with roots in medieval Spain.

Bringing the poetry to life

In the public school classroom

- Compare a war poem by Shmuel HaNagid with a Psalm or an Arabic poem of the era. What images and feelings do they share?
- Write a “muwashshah” in English that ends with a two line kharja in another language students speak at home.
- Read a Songs of Zion poem and a modern poem about home or migration; discuss how poets write about longing.
- Retell a familiar story in rhymed couplets, as Shahin did, or perform a spoken word poem about identity.
- Study liturgical poems as literature; students analyze them rather than recite them as prayer.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Pair a *piyyut* sung in your community with its poet's secular poems.
- Read Sarah Sassoon's *Distinctions* essay and trace the theme of return from HaLevi to Biton.
- Hold a poetry evening where students read their own work beside the medieval masters.
- Use the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit to bring these poets into the school year.

At home and with family

- Ask elders for proverbs, songs, or poems they remember, and write them down.
- Write a family acrostic poem using a grandparent's name.
- Read a poem aloud at a holiday table and talk about what it means to each person.
- Share your family's story with JIMENA.

Questions for discussion

- Why might poets in al Andalus have written in the forms of Arabic poetry while using the language of the Hebrew Bible?
- What does the kharja, a poem ending in a different language, suggest about everyday life in a multilingual society?
- How do poets in different centuries write about home, exile, and longing? What changes, and what stays the same?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Vanessa Hidary: Hebrew Mamita (JIMENA, 2024)

youtube.com/watch?v=AnfQoqa5i90

Ashtidek: Preserving the Beauty of Judeo Arabic, with Sarah Sassoon (JIMENA, 2024)

youtube.com/watch?v=6uGkyS_45CM

"Ya Ribbon Olam," words by Israel Najara (Milken Archive of Jewish Music, audio)

milkenarchive.org/music/works/view/ya-ribbon-olam

Read

***The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain*, translated by Peter Cole** (Princeton University Press, 2007).

About 400 poems by 54 poets.

english.yale.edu/node/5834

***Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol*, translated by Peter Cole** (Princeton University Press, 2001).

press.princeton.edu/node/24575

***Selected Poems of Shmuel HaNagid*, translated by Peter Cole** (Princeton University Press, 1996).

www2.publishersweekly.com/9780691011219

***You Who Cross My Path*, by Erez Biton, translated by Tsipi Keller** (BOA Editions, 2015).

poetryinternationalweb.org/pi/site/poet/item/27110/Erez-Biton

***The Fire Stays in Red*, by Ronny Someck** (University of Wisconsin Press and Dryad Press, 2002).

poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-6347_Someck

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"The Poetry of Exile and Return," by Sarah Sassoon Exile and return, from Ibn Gabirol and HaLevi to Shabazi, Biton, and translator Emma Lazarus.

distinctionsjournal.org/the-poetry-of-exile-and-return

"Telling Our Stories," by Sarah Sassoon A new generation of Mizrahi and Sephardic picture books and graphic novels.

distinctionsjournal.org/telling-our-stories-a-new-generation-of-mizrahi-and-sephardi-literature

Explore online

Early Medieval Poetry (Posen Library), with poems by Dunash, HaNagid, Ibn Gabirol, and more

posenlibrary.com/node/13600

"Will he, her beloved, remember?" (Posen Library), attributed to the wife of Dunash

posenlibrary.com/node/12532

Solomon Ibn Gabirol (Poetry Foundation)

poetryfoundation.org/poets/shelomo-ibn-gabirol

Moses ibn Ezra (Poetry Foundation)

poetryfoundation.org/poets/moshe-ibn-ezra

Yehudah Halevi (Poetry Foundation)

poetryfoundation.org/poets/yehudah-halevi

Tzion Halo Tishali, with translation (University of Rochester)

robbins.digitalscholar.rochester.edu/medhebrew/authors/rabbi-yehuda-halevis-collection/tzion-halo-tishali

Israel Najara (Jewish Virtual Library)

jewishvirtuallibrary.org/najara-israel-ben-moses

Shalem Shabazi (Jewish Virtual Library)

jewishvirtuallibrary.org/shabazi-shalem

Shahin (Jewish Virtual Library)

jewishvirtuallibrary.org/sh-x0101-hin

Sephardic Purim customs and koplus (University of Washington)

jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/sephardic-purim-customs-from-the-old-world-to-the-pacific-northwest

Women and Sephardic Music (Jewish Women's Archive)

jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/women-and-sephardic-music

Sarah Sassoon (Yetzirah)

yetzirahpoets.org/discover-jewish-poets/sarah-sassoon

From JIMENA

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

sepharditoolkit.org

Culture and Holidays videos

jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Share your 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 Posen Library of Jewish Culture and Civilization; the Poetry Foundation; Princeton University Press and Peter Cole's translations; the Jewish Encyclopedia (1906) and Encyclopaedia Judaica via the Jewish Virtual Library; the Jewish Women's Archive (Judith R. Cohen); the University of Washington; the University of Rochester; the Milken Archive of Jewish Music; the Jewish Language Project; André E. Elbaz and Ephraim Hazan, *AJS Review*; Poetry International; Yetzirah; the *Jewish Review of Books*; the *Forward*; and Sarah Sassoon in *Distinctions*. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.