

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Shabbat

The weekly day of rest, welcomed with blessings and song, savored over slow cooked dishes, and in winter greeted before dawn with the poetry of the bakkashot.

WHEN

Every week, from sundown on Friday until nightfall on Saturday.

SHARED BY ALL JEWS

Candles, Kiddush over wine, festive meals, prayer, rest from work, and Havdalah to close the day.

SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI FLAVOR

Table songs by poets of Spain and the Ottoman world, and overnight dishes such as dafina, tbit, and jachnun.

SPECIAL TO THIS EXPLAINER

The bakkashot: poems sung through the night on winter Shabbat mornings, a tradition of Aleppo and Morocco.

Shabbat, the seventh day, is at the heart of Jewish life everywhere. In Sephardic and Mizrahi homes from Casablanca to Baghdad to Bukhara, the core of the day was the same as in every Jewish community: rest, prayer, family, and three festive meals. What made each community's Shabbat its own were the melodies, the poems, the blessings exchanged between generations, and the dishes that cooked slowly overnight so a hot meal could be served without cooking on the day of rest. Several Shabbat songs sung by Jews worldwide were written by Sephardic and Mizrahi poets.

From Friday afternoon to Saturday night

- **Song of Songs.** Many Sephardic communities read the entire biblical Song of Songs before Shabbat, today usually on Friday afternoon. Its love poetry is read as a picture of the bond between God and the Jewish people.
- **Blessing the children.** In many Sephardic families, children, even grown ones, come to their parents and grandparents on Friday night to receive a blessing and then kiss their hands.
- **Table songs.** Families sing *zemirot*, hymns sung around the Shabbat table, often with melodies particular to their community.
- **A hot Shabbat meal.** Because cooking is not done on Shabbat, families prepared stews before sundown on Friday and let them cook slowly overnight. In many towns, pots went to the baker's oven.
- **Seudah shelishit.** A third meal is eaten late on Saturday afternoon. The kabbalist Isaac Luria wrote hymns for each of the three meals.
- **Havdalah.** Blessings over wine, spices, and a flame mark the end of Shabbat. The hymn *Ha-Mavdil*, now sung at Havdalah in every Jewish rite, was probably written by Isaac ibn Ghayyat of Spain (about 1030 to 1089).
- **Shabbat Chatan.** Among Sephardim, a groom is honored with a special call to the Torah on the Shabbat after his wedding. Some congregations shower him with candy.

"Yah Ribon" and its poet

One of the most beloved Shabbat songs in the world, *Yah Ribon* ("God, Master of the Universe"), was written in Aramaic by Rabbi Israel Najara (about 1555 to 1625). Born in Damascus, Najara belonged to the circle of mystics in Safed and later served as rabbi of Gaza. The first letters of the verses spell his first name, Israel.

His collection *Zemirot Yisrael* was first printed in Safed in 1587. Najara set his Hebrew poems to Arabic and Turkish tunes of his day. Today *Yah Ribon* is sung at Shabbat tables in nearly every Jewish community.

The bakkashot: singing through winter nights

On winter Shabbat mornings, in synagogues of Aleppo and Morocco, worshippers gathered at about two or three in the morning to sing *bakkashot* ("supplications"), Hebrew poems of longing for God and for redemption, until the morning prayers began. Scholars believe the custom as we know it grew among the kabbalists of Safed in the sixteenth century, and Najara's poems remain central to it. The season runs from after Sukkot toward Passover: Moroccan communities begin on Shabbat Bereshit and end on Shabbat Zakhor, just before Purim, about twenty Shabbatot, while the Aleppo tradition continues until Shabbat HaGadol, just before Passover.

In Morocco, skilled singer poets called *paytanim* lead the singing. Each Shabbat is linked to a *nuba*, a musical suite from the Andalusian tradition, a musical heritage Jews shared with their Muslim neighbors, and the main Moroccan collection, *Shir Yedidot* (1921), arranges about 550 poems by the weekly Torah portion. In Jerusalem, Jews from Aleppo founded the Ades Synagogue in 1901, where bakkashot are still sung for four or five hours. The tradition is enjoying a revival in Israel and France.

Community by community

Morocco

The Shabbat stew is *dafina*, "covered," also called *skhina* or *hamin*: meat, wheat berries, chickpeas, potatoes, and whole eggs. Families sent their pots to a communal oven overnight. Before dawn on winter Shabbatot, *paytanim* lead the bakkashot.

Sources: Jewish Journal; My Jewish Learning; Institut Européen des Musiques Juives

Syria (Aleppo)

Shabbat is of the utmost importance in the Syrian community. Poopa Dweck describes twelve loaves of Syrian bread on the table, recalling the showbread of the ancient Temple. Many families serve *hamud*, a lemony mint broth with *kibbeh* dumplings, on Friday night. Each week the cantor chants in a *maqam* chosen to fit the Torah portion, and families sing *pizmonim*, hymns often modeled on Arabic songs.

Sources: Jewish Action; My Jewish Learning; Mark Kligman; Sephardic Pizmonim Project

Iraq

The Shabbat dish is *tbit*, "of the house": chicken and rice spiced with cardamom, cinnamon, and turmeric, cooked overnight for Shabbat. Whole eggs in the pot turn a deep brown, like the *huevos haminados* of Ladino speaking communities.

Source: Jewish Journal

Yemen and Aden

Shabbat morning brings *kubaneh*, a buttery pull apart bread baked overnight, and *jachnun*, rolled pastry baked overnight on low heat. Both are served with grated tomato, often with eggs and spicy *zhug*. Jachnun comes from the Jews of Aden.

Source: My Jewish Learning (The Noshers)

Iran

In many Persian Jewish homes, Friday night dinner begins with *gondi*, chickpea flour dumplings, a dish unique to Iranian Jews, served with pickles and fresh herbs. Then comes *abgoosht*, a whole chicken stuffed with rice and cooked in a broth with chickpeas.

Source: Jewish Food Society

Bukhara (Central Asia)

Bukharian families make *osavo*, beef and rice with prunes, cooked overnight so that the whole house is fragrant with it by Shabbat morning.

Source: Jewish Food Society

Ottoman Sephardic (Turkey, Greece, the Balkans)

Friday night prayers, Kiddush, and Shabbat hymns are chanted in the Ottoman Turkish liturgical style, built on *makam* (musical mode). Seattle's Sephardic Bikur Holim congregation shares recordings of these melodies online.

Source: Sephardic Bikur Holim, Seattle

Many communities, one idea

Every overnight dish answers the same question: how to serve a hot meal without cooking on Shabbat. A Talmudic era value held that eating hot food on Shabbat honors the day. Each community answered with its own local ingredients.

Source: My Jewish Learning

Common misconceptions

- **"Cholent is the Shabbat stew."** Cholent is the Ashkenazi version. Sephardic and Mizrahi families make dafina, tbit, osavo, and many more.
- **"Shabbat songs come from Eastern Europe."** Songs sung everywhere, like *Yah Ribon* and *Ha-Mavdil*, were written by poets from Damascus and Spain.
- **"Jachnun is from Yemen."** It comes from Aden, a port city that became part of Yemen only in 1990.
- **"Jewish sacred music was separate from its neighbors' music."** Najara wrote to Arabic and Turkish tunes, Moroccan bakkashot use Andalusian suites, and Syrian hymns follow the Arabic maqam.

Words to know

Piyyut *Hebrew*

A liturgical poem. Plural *piyyutim*.

Zemirot *Hebrew*

Hymns sung around the Shabbat table.

Bakkashot *Hebrew*

"Supplications," poems sung before dawn on winter Shabbat mornings.

Paytan *Hebrew*

A singer poet who leads piyyutim.

Maqam *Arabic*

A musical mode; Syrian Jews chant each Shabbat in a chosen maqam.

Pizmon *Hebrew*

A hymn in the Syrian Jewish tradition.

Hamin *Hebrew*

"Hot," a general name for the overnight Shabbat stew.

Dafina *Moroccan Judeo Arabic*

"Covered," the Moroccan Shabbat stew.

Tbit *Iraqi Judeo Arabic*

"Of the house," Iraqi overnight chicken and rice.

Seudah shelishit *Hebrew*

The third Shabbat meal, on Saturday afternoon.

Bringing Shabbat to life

In the public school classroom

- Teach about Shabbat as a weekly day of rest found in many cultures, and compare it with other traditions of rest.
- Map the overnight dishes on this page and discuss how local ingredients shaped them.
- Listen to a recording of bakkashot or a Syrian pizmon and talk about how music travels between neighboring cultures.
- Read a translation of *Yah Ribon* as poetry, and research its author's life in Damascus, Safed, and Gaza.
- Do not have students light candles, recite Kiddush, sing prayers, or take part in any ritual.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Learn *Yah Ribon* with a Moroccan, Syrian, or Iraqi melody and compare it with the tune your community knows.
- Hold a winter bakkashot evening with a local paytan, or invite families to share their Shabbat melodies.
- Cook a dafina, tbit, or kubaneh together on Friday and taste it at a Shabbat lunch.
- Explore JIMENA's Mizrahi Shabbat Supplement.

At home and with family

- Ask an elder: What did Friday night look like in your home? Who blessed you, and what did you eat?
- Read *Buen Shabat, Shabbat Shalom* with a toddler.
- Write down a family Shabbat recipe and the story behind it.
- Record an elder singing a family melody for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why do you think so many communities created a slow cooked dish for the same day of the week? What does that show about how a shared rule can lead to many different traditions?
- Najara wrote religious poems to popular Arabic and Turkish tunes. What are the benefits and challenges of borrowing music from the surrounding culture?
- Why might people choose to gather at two in the morning to sing? What makes a tradition worth such effort?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Persian Jewish Music and Pre Kabbalat Shabbat with Galeet Dardashti (JIMENA, 2020)

youtube.com/watch?v=Dzzl918VZ5k

Shirat ha-Baqqashot according to the Moroccan rite (European Institute of Jewish Music, with video)

iemj.org/en/chirat-ha-baqqachot-selon-le-rite-marocain

Sephardic Pizmonim Project (Syrian hymns with recordings, by maqam and week)

pizmonim.com

Hazzanut and recordings (Sephardic Bikur Holim, Seattle: Ottoman Sephardic Shabbat melodies)

sbhseattle.org/hazzanut-and-recordings

Read

Buen Shabat, Shabbat Shalom, by Sarah Aroeste, illustrated by Ayesha L. Rubio (Kar-Ben, 2020). A Ladino board book.

pjllibrary.org/buenshabat

Aromas of Aleppo: The Legendary Cuisine of Syrian Jews, by Poopa Dweck (HarperCollins, 2007). Includes Shabbat menus.

jewishbookcouncil.org/book/the-aromas-of-aleppo

The Book of Jewish Food, by Claudia Roden (Knopf, 1996).

penguinrandomhouse.com/books/156485/the-book-of-jewish-food-by-claudia-roden

Maqam and Liturgy, by Mark L. Kligman (Wayne State University Press, 2009). For teachers; link is a review by Galeet Dardashti.

mjreviews.org/2010/06/28/maqam-and-liturgy-ritual-music-and-aesthetics-of-syrian-jews-in-brooklyn

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"Sontinuity: The Tree and the Web," by Vanessa Paloma Elbaz How Sephardic songs passed down through synagogue and home, with recordings.

distinctionsjournal.org/the-tree-and-the-web

Explore online

Baqqashah (pl. Baqqashot) (Jewish Music Research Centre, Hebrew University)

jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/content/baqqashah-pl-baqqashot

Les baqqachot (European Institute of Jewish Music)

iemj.org/en/les-baqqachot

Zemirot, or Shabbat Table Songs (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/zemirot

Yah Ribon, with English translation (Open Siddur)

opensiddur.org/prayers/solilunar/shabbat/seudat-leil-shabbat/yah-ribon-a-piyyut-by-yisrael-najara-16th-c-translated-by-israel-brodie-1962

Shabbat Stew Two Ways: Moroccan Dafina and Iraqi T'bit (Jewish Journal)

jewishjournal.com/culture/food/311172/shabbat-stew-two-ways-moroccan-dafina-and-iraqi-tbit

The Rich History of Yemen's Shabbat Pastry, Jachnun (The Noshers)

myjewishlearning.com/the-noshers/the-rich-history-of-yemens-shabbat-pastry-jachnun

For Many Jews, This Sour Soup Is the Taste of Shabbat (The Noshers)

myjewishlearning.com/the-noshers/for-many-jews-this-sour-soup-is-the-taste-of-shabbat

A Persian Shabbat Tradition Simmers on Long Island (Jewish Food Society)

jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/a-persian-shabbat-tradition-simmers-on-long-island

Ha-Mavdil (Encyclopaedia Judaica, via Jewish Virtual Library)

jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ha-mavdil

From JIMENA

Mizrahi Shabbat Supplement (PDF)

s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/tf-jimena-prd/pdfs/Mizrahi-Shabbat-Supplement-2.pdf

Culture and Holidays video collection

jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

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

sepharditoolkit.org



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 Jewish Music Research Centre at the Hebrew University; the European Institute of Jewish Music; the Sephardic Pizmonim Project; Mark Kligman, *Maqam and Liturgy*; the Jewish Encyclopedia; the Encyclopaedia Judaica; Open Siddur; My Jewish Learning and The Noshers; NJOP; Rabbi Yosef Bitton, *Halakha of the Day*; Jewish Journal; Jewish Action; the Jewish Food Society; and Sephardic Bikur Holim, Seattle. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.