

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Tisha B'Av

A day of mourning for Jerusalem's Temples, which Sephardic Jews also came to remember as the season of the expulsion from Spain in 1492.

WHEN

The 9th of the Hebrew month of Av, in July or August. The fast begins at sundown and ends at nightfall the next day.

WHAT IT REMEMBERS

The destruction of the First Temple by Babylon and the Second Temple by Rome, and later disasters that tradition linked to the same season.

HOW IT IS KEPT

Fasting, reading the Book of Lamentations, chanting *kinot* (poems of mourning), and sitting on the floor or on low seats.

SPECIAL TO THIS EXPLAINER

Why Sephardic memory joins Tisha B'Av with 1492, what the calendar really shows, and Ladino traditions carried from Rhodes to Seattle.

Tisha B'Av is the saddest day of the Jewish year. For about two thousand years, Jews have gathered on the 9th of Av to read the Book of Lamentations, traditionally linked to the prophet Jeremiah, and to mourn the fall of Jerusalem. Over the centuries, communities added their own losses to the day. For Sephardic Jews, the descendants of the Jews of Spain and Portugal, the expulsion from Spain in 1492 became part of that memory. In the twentieth century, Sephardic families from the island of Rhodes added another: their community's deportation in the Holocaust in the summer of 1944.

How Tisha B'Av is observed

- **A season of mourning.** Tisha B'Av ends a three week period of mourning. Spanish and Portuguese synagogues use a more somber melody for the prophetic readings of those weeks.
- **The fast.** Adults refrain from eating and drinking, washing, wearing leather shoes, and other comforts.
- **Lamentations and kinot.** In the evening, the congregation reads *Eikhah*, the Book of Lamentations, and chants *kinot*, poems of grief. Spanish and Portuguese Jews have their own melody for Lamentations, and Sephardic Jews of the Ottoman world read it with a Ladino translation.
- **The Book of Job.** Many Sephardic congregations also read from Job, the biblical book about suffering and faith, on the morning of Tisha B'Av.
- **Sitting low.** Like mourners, people sit on the floor or on low seats. In some Spanish and Portuguese synagogues, a black curtain covers the ark.

1492 and the 9th of Av: what the calendar shows

On 31 March 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella signed the decree expelling the Jews of Spain. It gave them until the end of July to convert to Christianity or leave. By careful reckoning, the 31 July deadline fell on the 7th of Av, and the last Jews are remembered as departing on 2 August, which was Tisha B'Av itself.

Many sources simply say the deadline “fell on Tisha B'Av,” and some describe a short extension. Either way, the expulsion came within days of the fast. Don Isaac Abravanel, a leader of the exiles, saw the timing as meaningful, and Sephardic memory has joined the two ever since.

Remembering across the centuries

The Mishnah, an early collection of Jewish law, lists several calamities on the 9th of Av. Later generations added more. These are the events most often recalled, especially in Sephardic communities.

The First Temple, 587 or 586 BCE

Babylonian armies besieged Jerusalem and burned the Temple built by King Solomon. Many Judeans were taken into exile in Babylonia.

Sources: University of Washington; Wikipedia

The Second Temple, 70 CE

Roman forces destroyed the rebuilt Temple at the end of the Great Revolt. Some rabbinic chronologies give the year as 68. In 135 CE, the fortress of Betar fell, ending the Bar Kokhba revolt.

Sources: University of Washington; Wikipedia

Spain, 1492

After the decree, those who remained Jewish left. Scholars disagree on the numbers, with estimates from about 40,000 to 100,000. Many went to Portugal, where forced baptisms followed a few years later. Others reached North Africa, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire, whose sultan Bayezid II welcomed refugees to cities such as Thessaloniki and Izmir.

Sources: Chabad.org; Torat Har Etzion; Wikipedia

Rhodes, 1944

On 23 July 1944, about 1,800 Jews of Rhodes and nearby Kos were forced onto boats and sent to Auschwitz. Only about 150 Jews of Rhodes survived. Their last Tisha B'Av was spent on cargo boats bound for a camp near Athens. Rhodesli families in Seattle remember them on this day.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

Community by community

Salonica (Thessaloniki)

Bouena Sarfatty, a Sephardic woman from Salonica, recalled in verse that on Tisha B'Av "we sit on the floor and fast," and that her mother wore black.

Source: University of Washington, quoting Renée Levine Melammed, *An Ode to Salonika* (Indiana University Press, 2013)

Rhodes and Seattle

Ladino sayings show how deeply the day was felt. A person who wept constantly was "the prophet Jeremiah." Something that dragged on was "like the haftarah of Tisha B'Av," a joke about its long Ladino translation. Rebecca Amato Levy recorded these in her memoir *I Remember Rhodes*.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

The Ottoman Sephardic prayer book

Sephardic Jews used *Seder Arba Ta'aniot*, the "Order of the Four Fasts," mixing Hebrew with Ladino. Seattle's University of Washington holds 1871 and 1921 editions printed in Vienna for Ottoman Jewish readers, donated by the family of Haham David Behar of Congregation Ezra Bessaro.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

Seattle today

In 2012, Isaac Azose of Seattle published *Tefilah Le-Moshe*, a book for the fast days with the Ladino written in Latin letters, making it easier for new generations to read.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

Spanish and Portuguese Jews (London, Amsterdam, New York)

These communities, founded by descendants of Jews who left Spain and Portugal, traditionally place a black curtain over the ark on Tisha B'Av. They have their own chant for Lamentations and a special melody for the morning's prophetic reading. In England, biblical passages in the Tisha B'Av prayer book were long read in Spanish translation.

Sources: Wikipedia (Spanish and Portuguese Jews; Tisha B'Av, citing Herbert C. Dobrinsky)

Morocco and Tunisia

North African communities have a rich tradition of *kinot*, with poems such as *Nishmat Shedudim* and *Yonah Nikh'avah*. Later *kinot*, in many communities, mourn more recent tragedies, including the expulsion from Spain.

Source: Wikipedia (Kinnot)

Iran

Iranian Jews are reported to call the fast *Noi*, and its eve *Shab e Noi*.

Source: Wikipedia (Tisha B'Av)

A poet of medieval Spain

Yehuda HaLevi, a great Hebrew poet of medieval Spain, wrote "Tziyon Halo Tishali" ("Zion, will you not ask"). It is a *kinah* of longing for Jerusalem, and many later poets imitated it.

Sources: Wikipedia (Kinnot); Distinctions

Common misconceptions

- **"Spain expelled the Jews on the exact day of Tisha B'Av."** Tradition joins them, and the final departures came very close to the 9th of Av, but the 31 July deadline itself fell two days earlier. Sources differ on the details.
- **"Tisha B'Av is only about ancient history."** Communities have long added later losses, from Spain in 1492 to Rhodes in 1944.
- **"Everyone who was expelled from Spain went to Christian Europe."** Many found refuge in Muslim lands, especially the Ottoman Empire and North Africa, where Sephardic culture flourished for centuries.
- **"All Middle Eastern Jews are Sephardic."** Iraqi, Iranian, and Yemenite Jews are usually called Mizrahi. Many Syrian and Moroccan Jews identify as Sephardic, meaning descended from the Jews of Spain and Portugal.

Words to know

Tisha B'Av *Hebrew*

"The ninth of Av," the fast day of mourning.

Eikhah *Hebrew*

"How." The Hebrew name of the Book of Lamentations, from its first word.

Kinot *Hebrew*

Poems of mourning chanted on Tisha B'Av. One poem is a *kinah*.

Haftarah *Hebrew*

A reading from the Prophets that follows the Torah reading.

Seder Arba Ta'aniot *Hebrew*

"Order of the Four Fasts," a Sephardic prayer book for fast days.

Seudah mafseket *Hebrew*

The "separating meal" eaten before a fast begins.

Sefarad *Hebrew*

Spain. The root of the word "Sephardic."

Alhambra Decree *Spanish history*

The 1492 order expelling Jews from the Spanish kingdoms.

Rhodesli *Ladino*

A Jew from the island of Rhodes, or a descendant.

Noi *Persian*

The Iranian Jewish name for Tisha B'Av.

Bringing Tisha B'Av to life

In the public school classroom

- Never ask students to fast or take part in mourning practices. Teach about the day instead.
- Study the 1492 decree as a primary source, and map where the exiles went, including Muslim lands that welcomed them.
- Use the dating question as a lesson in historical method: compare sources, then check the Hebrew and Julian calendars.
- Teach the Rhodes deportation within Holocaust units in an age appropriate way.
- Read Lamentations or Yehuda HaLevi in English as poetry of loss and longing.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Compare the Ladino and Hebrew of a passage from Lamentations using the University of Washington's digital collection.
- Explore the Ladino sayings about Jeremiah and the haftarah, and collect sayings from your own families.
- Invite a Rhodesli or Moroccan family to share how they kept the day.
- Learn why the expulsion is remembered on Tisha B'Av, and discuss how memory and history can differ.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: Did your family keep Tisha B'Av? Which places and people did they remember?
- Look at a map of the Sephardic world after 1492 and trace your family's journeys.
- Read Yehuda HaLevi's "Zion, will you not ask" together in translation.
- Record an elder's memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might a community choose to remember a new tragedy on an ancient day of mourning rather than on its own date?
- When tradition and the historical record differ slightly, as with 1492, what can each teach us?
- The Ladino sayings joke gently about a sad day. What role can humor play in how communities remember?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Sephardic Jews and the Holocaust, with Dr. Devin Naar (JIMENA, 2023). For older students and adults.
youtube.com/watch?v=klrctvJFbE8

Far from Us, But Close at Heart: Sephardic Jews in America and the Holocaust (JIMENA, 2018)
youtube.com/watch?v=9e004haj6xQ

Read

After Expulsion: 1492 and the Making of Sephardic Jewry, by **Jonathan S. Ray** (NYU Press, 2013). For teachers.
muse.jhu.edu/book/26382

A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs, by **Herbert C. Dobrinsky** (Yeshiva University Press; first published 1986). For teachers.
jewishbookcouncil.org/book/a-treasury-of-sephardic-laws-and-customs-the-ritual-practices-of-syrian-moroccan-judeo-spanish

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"The Poetry of Exile and Return," by Sarah Sassoon Sephardic and Mizrahi poems of exile and longing for Zion, from Yehuda HaLevi to today.
distinctionsjournal.org/the-poetry-of-exile-and-return

Explore online

Tisha Be-Av in Sephardic Seattle: A Ladino Journey from the Old World to the New (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/tisha-av-sephardic-seattle-ladino-journey-old-world-new

Remembering Rhodes, Family History, and the Sephardic Holocaust (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/personal-history/remembering-rhodes-sephardic-holocaust

Holocaust Memory, Reconstructed: the Jews of Rhodes (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/sephardic-holocaust-memory-rhodes-jewish-community

Sephardic Studies Digital Collection (University of Washington, Ladino books and recordings)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/sephardic-studies-digital-library-museum

The Spanish Expulsion (Chabad.org)
chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2435008/jewish/The-Spanish-Expulsion.htm

The Expulsion from Spain (1492) (Torat Har Etzion, for teachers)
etzion.org.il/en/node/32725

From JIMENA

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

Oral history collection
jimena.org/oral-history

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; Renée Levine Melammed, *An Ode to Salonika*; Chabad.org; Torat Har Etzion; NJOP; Wikipedia articles on Tisha B'Av, Kinnot, the Alhambra Decree, and Spanish and Portuguese Jews; Jonathan S. Ray, *After Expulsion*; and Distinctions. Dates for 1492 were checked against the Hebrew calendar. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.