

LIFECYCLE AND CUSTOMS

Weddings

Spreads of symbolic foods, velvet gowns embroidered in gold, painted marriage contracts, and songs that carry a couple from engagement to the Shabbat that follows.

WHAT IT IS

A series of celebrations, not one day: engagement, gifts between families, the ketubah signing, the ceremony, and festivities that follow.

WHERE

Jewish communities from Morocco and the Ottoman lands to Syria, Kurdistan, and Iran, each with its own customs.

SHARED ROOTS

Some customs were shared with Muslim and Christian neighbors, then given Jewish meaning through Hebrew blessings, Torah readings, and songs.

TODAY

Families in Israel, the United States, and beyond are reviving these customs and blending them into modern weddings.

For Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, a wedding was the joy of a whole community. In Ottoman cities, a messenger walked from house to house to invite every family. In Iran, couples sat before a spread of foods chosen for their meaning. In Morocco, a father gave his daughter a velvet gown she would wear for the rest of her life. And everywhere, the marriage contract, the *ketubah*, could be a work of art. The henna evening before the wedding is one of the best known customs of all, and it has its own explainer in this series.

From engagement to the Shabbat after

Customs differed from place to place, but many weddings moved through similar stages:

- **Engagement and gifts.** Families sealed a match by exchanging sweets and gifts. Persian Jews held a *shirini khoran*, a sweets party, when the bride's family accepted the proposal. Ottoman Sephardim sent a *mandada*, a tray of gifts and sweets, between the two households.
- **Preparation.** The days before the wedding often brought the henna, a visit to the *mikveh* (ritual bath), and in Iran a gathering of women at the bathhouse.
- **The ketubah.** The marriage contract is signed by two witnesses and read aloud at the ceremony. Persian Jewish families often hold a separate ketubah signing party.
- **The ceremony.** Under the *chuppah*, the wedding canopy, the couple hears blessings, and in many communities songs and joyful ululation ring out.
- **Dowry.** Wealthy Sephardic families listed the bride's dowry in detail and read it aloud as a mark of status. Rhodes even kept community records of dowries.

Shabbat Chatan: honoring the groom

In Ashkenazi communities the groom is called to the Torah on the Shabbat before his wedding. In many Sephardic communities the honor traditionally comes on the Shabbat after, called *Shabbat Chatan*, the groom's Shabbat. The groom receives an *aliyah*, and a special reading is added for him: the verses of Genesis 24 that tell how a bride, Rebecca, was found for Isaac. The custom is attributed to the Geonim, sages who lived more than a thousand years ago. Families often sponsor a festive kiddush, and today some Sephardic congregations hold the celebration before the wedding instead.

Community by community

Iran: the sofreh aghd

Iranian couples of every faith may sit before a *sofreh aghd*, a wedding spread laid on fine cloth. Common items include a mirror and candlesticks, bread, cheese, and herbs, eggs and nuts, coins, fruit, and sweets, each chosen as a wish for the couple's life together.

Families place their own holy book on the spread, so a Jewish couple may set out a Torah. Relatives rub sugar over a cloth held above the couple's heads.

Source: general references on Iranian weddings, including Wikipedia

Iran: songs and blessings

In Shiraz, women sing the wedding song "Vasoonak Shirazi" together, without instruments, at ketubah signings. Guests greet the couple with *kell*, a joyful ululation. Brides once wore jewelry believed to protect them. In the twentieth century more couples chose their own partners, and in Los Angeles weddings grew into large community celebrations.

Sources: Saba Soomekh (UCLA); Tabby Refael, Jewish Journal (2018)

Morocco: the great dress

The Moroccan Jewish bride wore the *keswa el kbira*, "the great dress": a velvet wrap skirt striped with gold, a corselet heavy with golden braid, wide muslin sleeves, and a broad gold belt. It was garnet red in coastal and southern towns and green or blue elsewhere.

Her father gave it to her for the wedding, and she wore it at family celebrations for the rest of her life.

Source: Alliance Israélite Universelle

Ottoman lands

In Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans, a *kombidador* walked through the neighborhood with a guest list, inviting each household in person. The Ladino classic *Me'am Lo'ez* taught that singing and dancing to bring joy to the couple is a *mitzvah*, a good deed.

Ottoman ketubot added a promise that the husband would take no second wife.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

Seattle: a story in invitations

Sephardic immigrants brought the *kombidador* to Seattle, but printed invitations soon took his place. One invitation from 1923 was printed in English and in Ladino in Hebrew letters; by 1951, invitations were in English alone, a small record of a language fading.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

Syria

In Brooklyn's Syrian Jewish community, many weddings are held at the Shaare Zion synagogue. *Pizmonim*, Hebrew hymns set to the melodies of Arabic music, are sung beneath the chuppah, and receptions are lively, crowded, and full of food such as *sambusak*, savory filled pastries.

Sources: Esther Levy Chehebar, Tablet (2018); Brooklyn Public Library

Kurdistan

The Jewish Museum in New York holds a round cloth cover, embroidered in the early 1800s by the Jews of Iranian Kurdistan, made to cover a large brass tray. It was probably used for the exchange of gifts and food between an engaged couple. Its stitched inscription says it was made by a woman "for her beloved," Ephraim son of Aaron.

Source: The Jewish Museum, New York

The ketubah: a contract and a work of art

The ketubah sets out a husband's obligations to his wife. It is traditionally written in Aramaic. Around its legal text, artists in many lands painted borders that turned the document into a treasured object. Around 1400, the North African sage Rabbi Shimon ben Tsemah Duran approved decorated borders.

Iran was the leading center of ketubah decoration in the Islamic world, with richly painted contracts from Tehran, Isfahan, Yazd, Kashan, Hamadan, and Mashhad. Their decoration used flowers and animals rather than human figures. **Ottoman** Sephardic ketubot also avoided figures. **Italy** produced the most lavishly illustrated ketubot in Europe, with Jerusalem, biblical couples, and signs of the zodiac. In **the Americas**, printed certificates replaced handmade ketubot. Museums and libraries such as Yale University and the University of Washington share these contracts online, and a JewishGen collection holds Algerian ketubot from 1832 to 1953.

Common misconceptions

- **"All Jewish weddings follow the same customs."** Even the groom's Shabbat falls at different times in Sephardic and Ashkenazi tradition.
- **"The henna is the wedding."** The henna is one celebration among many, from the engagement to the Shabbat after.
- **"The sofreh aghd belongs to one religion."** It is an Iranian custom shared by Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, each adding their own scripture.
- **"Jewish art never shows people."** Italian ketubot show couples and biblical scenes; Iranian and Ottoman ketubot chose other designs.

Words to know

Ketubah (plural ketubot) *Hebrew*

The Jewish marriage contract, traditionally written in Aramaic.

Chuppah *Hebrew*

The canopy under which the wedding ceremony takes place.

Shabbat Chatan *Hebrew*

"The groom's Shabbat," when the groom is honored in the synagogue.

Sofreh aghd *Persian*

The wedding spread of symbolic foods and objects.

Shirini khoran *Persian*

"Eating sweets," a party marking the acceptance of a proposal.

Kell *Persian*

A joyful ululation sung at celebrations.

Keswa el kbira *Moroccan Judeo Arabic*

"The great dress," the Moroccan Jewish bridal costume.

Kombidador *Ladino*

A messenger who delivered wedding invitations in person.

Mandada *Ladino*

A tray of gifts and sweets exchanged between the two families.

Pizmonim *Hebrew*

Hymns sung by Syrian Jews, often set to Arabic melodies.

Bringing wedding traditions to life

In the public school classroom

- Compare wedding customs across cultures: the Iranian sofreh aghd is shared by families of several faiths, a good starting point for discussing shared regional culture.
- Study ketubot as art: compare Iranian, Ottoman, and Italian examples in the Yale online exhibit and discuss why their decoration differs.
- Use the Seattle invitations from 1923 to 1951 to explore how immigrant languages change over generations.
- Do not stage a mock wedding or have students recite blessings.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Display images of decorated ketubot and invite students to design a border inspired by their own family's roots.
- Celebrate a Shabbat Chatan in your community, and explain how its timing differs among Sephardim and Ashkenazim.
- Invite grandparents to describe the weddings of their youth, and pair the talk with the Henna explainer.
- Explore the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for year round ideas.

At home and with family

- Find your family's ketubot and wedding photographs, and record who, where, and when.
- Ask elders: What foods, songs, and clothing did our family's weddings include?
- Planning a wedding? Consider a custom from your roots, such as a sofreh, a family song, or a hand painted ketubah.
- Share your family's wedding story with JIMENA.

Questions for discussion

- Why do so many cultures fill a wedding with objects and foods that stand for hopes, like sweetness, light, or plenty?
- What can a single object, such as a ketubah or an invitation, tell a historian about a community?
- How do families today decide which old customs to keep, change, or bring back?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Sephardic Wedding Traditions: Stories from Around the World (JIMENA, 2025)

youtube.com/watch?v=zlgn6BFAnZA

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

youtube.com/watch?v=Dzzl918VZ5k

"Abyadi Ana," the Moroccan Jewish henna song (Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre, with audio)

jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/content/abyadi-ana

Culture and Holidays video collection (JIMENA)

jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Explore online

Exploring Sephardic Life Cycle Customs (University of Washington digital exhibit). See especially:

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

Ketubot: Marriage Contracts in the Sephardic Diaspora

jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs/ketubot-marriage-contracts-in-the-sephardic-diaspora

Kombidadores: Sephardic Wedding Invitations

jewishstudies.washington.edu/exploring-sephardic-life-cycle-customs/kombidadores-sephardic-wedding-invitations

Iranian Ketubot (Yale University Library). Also see [Italian](#) and [Sephardic](#) ketubot.

judaica-exhibits.library.yale.edu/exhibits/ketubah/iran.html

Sephardic Ketubot from Algeria (JewishGen, Jeff Malka Collection)

jewishgen.org/databases/algeria/AlgeriaKet.html

The Jewish Costume of Morocco (Alliance Israélite Universelle online exhibit)

bibliotheque-numerique-aiu.org/en/exhibitions-us/exhibitions/80-the-jewish-costume-of-morocco

Ceremonial Tray Cover, Kurdistan (The Jewish Museum, New York) collections.thejewishmuseum.org/collection/11741-ceremonial-tray-cover

Customs and Laws of the Week before the Wedding (Yeshivat Har Etzion). Includes the Sephardic groom's Shabbat.

etzion.org.il/en/laws-wedding-2-customs-and-laws-week-wedding

Read

"To Be an Iranian Jewish Bride," by Saba Soomekh In *100 Years of Sephardic Los Angeles* (UCLA Leve Center for Jewish Studies, 2020).

sephardiclosangeles.org/portfolios/iranian-jewish-bride

***A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs*, by Herbert C.**

Dobrinsky (Yeshiva University Press). Syrian, Moroccan, and Judeo Spanish life cycle customs in North America.

jewishbookcouncil.org/book/a-treasury-of-sephardic-laws-and-customs-the-ritual-practices-of-syrian-moroccan-judeo-spanish

"Continuity, Persian Style," by Tabby Refael (Jewish Journal, 2018).

A Shirazi ketubah signing.

jewishjournal.com/commentary/columnist/237116/continuity-persian-style

"Who's Jane?" by Esther Levy Chehebar (Tablet, 2018). Syrian Jewish weddings in Brooklyn.

tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/jane-the-wedding-attendant

From JIMENA

Henna in Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish Life (Cultural Heritage Series explainer)

jimena.org/cultural-heritage

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

sepharditoolkit.org

Oral history collection

jimena.org/oral-history

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; Yale University Library; the Alliance Israélite Universelle; The Jewish Museum, New York; JewishGen; Saba Soomekh, *100 Years of Sephardic Los Angeles* (UCLA); Jewish Journal; Tablet; the Brooklyn Public Library; Yeshivat Har Etzion; the Jewish Virtual Library; NJOP; and general references on Iranian weddings, including Wikipedia. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.