

LANGUAGE, LEARNING, AND THOUGHT

Women, Tradition, and Leadership

From grandmothers' songs and healing lore to Rosh Chodesh celebrations, scholars, and singers: how Sephardic and Mizrahi women carried Jewish life forward.

KEEPERS OF TRADITION

At home, women passed down songs, recipes, blessings, and healing customs in Ladino, Judeo Arabic, and other Jewish languages.

WOMEN'S DAYS

Some communities marked special days led by women, such as Chag HaBanot on Rosh Chodesh Tevet and Bsisa on Rosh Chodesh Nisan.

LEADERS

Women ran businesses, helped refugees escape, taught in schools, led a yeshiva, and became celebrated singers and composers.

TODAY

Scholars, artists, and educators are recovering women's voices and bringing these traditions back to life.

History books often tell the story of rabbis, merchants, and community leaders, most of them men. Yet much of what Sephardic and Mizrahi families still treasure today, from the songs sung at weddings to the sweets prepared for holidays, was kept alive by women. Mothers and grandmothers taught children through song and story, led home ceremonies, cared for the sick, and passed customs from one generation to the next. A number of women also became public leaders, scholars, teachers, and artists whose names are remembered across the Jewish world.

Tradition carried at home

Songs. Ladino song was mainly a women's repertoire. Women sang long ballads called *romances* while nursing, rocking babies, cooking, and sewing; in Morocco, girls sang them on courtyard swings. Wedding songs are the largest group, and women also sang birth songs and laments called *endechas*. In Ottoman lands, a lead wedding singer called the *cantadera* was joined by women playing tambourines. In Arabic speaking lands, women sang Judeo Arabic wedding songs such as the Moroccan "Abyadi Ana," and in Baghdad women once played the drums at henna celebrations.

Healing and protection. Among Ottoman Sephardic families, women performed home rituals to prevent and cure illness, including remedies against *mal ojo*, the evil eye, and *espanto*, fright. They used herbs, oil, and sugar, a practice that scholars Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt describe as "sweetening the spirits." These customs complemented the prayers men led in the synagogue.

Lifecycle. Ottoman Sephardic families welcomed baby girls at home with a ceremony called *las fadas* or *la fijola*, whose blessing names

The tree and the web

In an essay for JIMENA's journal *Distinctions*, scholar Vanessa Paloma Elbaz describes two ways Sephardic culture survived centuries of dispersal. "The tree" is knowledge handed down through family lines and the synagogue. "The web" is knowledge shared through homes, gatherings, and women's songs and proverbs.

Her sound archive, KHOYA, records Moroccan Jewish elders with special attention to women's oral traditions. She notes that the division is not strict: women take part in the tree, and men in the web.

heroines such as Miriam and Queen Esther. At funerals, some Ottoman Sephardic communities hired women mourners who sang laments.

Women's days and gatherings

Rosh Chodesh, the new month

Jewish tradition has long linked the start of each Hebrew month with women. The Jerusalem Talmud records women's custom of not working on Rosh Chodesh, and a midrash explains it as a reward for the women who refused to give their jewelry to make the golden calf. Since the 1970s, Rosh Chodesh women's groups have spread widely. Two Sephardic and Mizrahi women's celebrations fall on Rosh Chodesh.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Peninei Halakha

Chag HaBanot (North Africa)

The "Festival of the Daughters," *Eid al Banat* in Judeo Arabic, falls on Rosh Chodesh Tevet, during Hanukkah. Best preserved in Tunisia and Djerba, it was also known in Libya, Algeria, Morocco, Istanbul, and Thessaloniki. Women lit the candles, gathered, sang, and refrained from work; mothers gave daughters gifts, and women who had quarreled made peace.

Sources: Jewish Theological Seminary; Rossing Center; My Jewish Learning

Bsisa (Tunisia and Libya)

On Rosh Chodesh Nisan, two weeks before Passover, families gather around a bowl of grain, date honey, almonds, and spices. The head of the household, traditionally the mother, turns the house key in the mixture, and a blessing is said in Judeo Arabic. The mother then blesses each family member.

Sources: Jewish Women's Archive; My Jewish Learning

Leil Purim (Kurdistan)

On the eve of Purim, Jewish women in Zakho, Amedi, and other towns gathered by the river. Mothers bathed their daughters so they would be as beautiful and brave as Queen Esther, and women sang wedding songs, danced, and decorated one another with henna. The custom continued until the mid twentieth century. Its surviving descriptions were written by outside ethnographers, not by the women themselves.

Source: My Jewish Learning (Ariya Sharif and Mira Zylali)

Women who led

Doña Gracia Nasi (about 1510 to 1569)

Born in Portugal to a family forced to convert to Christianity, she ran her family's great trading firm and used its wealth to help other *conversos* escape the Inquisition. She lived openly as a Jew in Ferrara, then settled in Constantinople, where she founded a yeshiva and a synagogue. The famous Ferrara Bible of 1553 was dedicated to her.

Source: Jewish Women's Archive (Miriam Bodian)

Asenath Barzani (about 1590 to 1670)

Her father, a Kurdish rabbi, founded a yeshiva in Mosul. She taught its students, and after her husband's death she headed the yeshiva. Her surviving letters show mastery of Talmud, Midrash, and Kabbalah. She is often called the first woman rabbi, though she was not formally ordained, and many legends grew around her.

Sources: Encyclopaedia Judaica (Renée Levine Melammed); My Jewish Learning

Zohra El Fassia (1905 to 1994)

Born in Sefrou, Morocco, she was a master of *malhun*, sung Moroccan poetry, and made records from the 1930s. She sang at the royal palace for Mohammed V. After settling in Israel in the 1960s she never regained her fame, but her recording of the henna song "Abyadi Ana" survives, and Israeli artists recorded a tribute to her in 2016.

Source: Jewish Women's Archive (Tamar Sella)

Flory Jagoda (1923 to 2021)

Born in Sarajevo, she lost much of her family in the Holocaust and brought their Ladino songs to the United States. She composed new songs too, including the Hanukkah favorite "Ocho Kandelikas" (1983), and became a National Heritage Fellow in 2002. She is often called the "nona," or grandmother, of Ladino song.

Sources: Jewish Women's Archive; National Endowment for the Arts; JTA

Learning and new voices

Schools for girls. Before modern times, many Jewish girls in the region learned at home from their mothers; records of girls' schooling are scarce. In the late 1800s the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a French Jewish organization, opened schools for girls as well as boys, from Morocco to Iraq. By 1872 women were teaching for the Alliance, often far from home in cities such as Fez, Tripoli, Alexandria, and Rhodes. Historian Frances Malino describes how these teachers championed girls' literacy and worked against child marriage.

Mizrahi feminism. In Israel in the 1990s, Mizrahi women within the feminist movement began to organize on their own, holding their first Mizrahi feminist conference in 1995. Scholars and activists in this movement study how gender, ethnic background, class, and immigration shape women's lives, and work to recover Mizrahi women's history and heritage. One leading figure was criminologist and filmmaker Vicki Shiran (1947 to 2004), born in Cairo. Participants hold a wide range of political and religious views. JIMENA explores these themes in its guide *Chag HaBanot and Mizrahi Feminism*.

Common misconceptions

- **"Women had little role in religious life."**
Women led home ceremonies such as Bsisá, kept songs and prayers alive, and in some cases taught Torah.
- **"Asenath Barzani was ordained."** She taught and led a yeshiva, but "first woman rabbi" is a modern description, not a formal title.
- **"'Ocho Kandelikas' is an ancient folk song."** Flory Jagoda wrote it in 1983.
- **"Rosh Chodesh for women is new."**
Modern groups began in the 1970s, but the custom is recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud.

Words to know

Rosh Chodesh *Hebrew*

"Head of the month," the first day of each Hebrew month.

Chag HaBanot (Eid al Banat) *Hebrew; Judeo Arabic*

"Festival of the Daughters," on Rosh Chodesh Tevet.

Bsisá *Tunisian and Libyan Judeo Arabic*

A sweet grain mixture and the home ceremony that welcomes Nisan.

Leil Purim *Hebrew*

"Purim night," a Kurdish Jewish women's gathering.

Romance *Ladino*

A long narrative ballad, often sung by women at home.

Endecha *Ladino*

A lament sung in mourning.

Cantadera *Ladino*

The lead woman singer at an Ottoman Sephardic wedding.

Mal ojo *Ladino*

The evil eye, guarded against with home remedies.

Malhun *Moroccan Arabic*

Long sung poems in everyday Arabic.

Converso *Spanish and Portuguese*

A Jew forced to convert to Christianity, or a descendant.

Bringing these stories to life

In the public school classroom

- Compare women's roles as keepers of family tradition across many cultures, including students' own.
- Read short biographies of Doña Gracia Nasi and Asenath Barzani, and place them on a world timeline.
- Listen to Ladino and Judeo Arabic songs by women such as Flory Jagoda and Zohra El Fassia, and discuss how songs carry history.
- Describe customs such as Bsisá or Chag HaBanot; do not hold a ceremony or have students light candles or recite blessings.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Celebrate Chag HaBanot during Hanukkah, or hold a Rosh Chodesh gathering that honors women in students' families.
- Read *Osnat and Her Dove* with young children and study Asenath Barzani's letters with older students.
- Use the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit to weave women's stories into the school year.

At home and with family

- Ask the women in your family: What songs did your mother sing? Which recipes or blessings came from her?
- Record a grandmother or aunt singing or telling a story, and share it with JIMENA's oral history project.
- Write down family remedies, sayings, and customs, with who taught them.

Questions for discussion

- Why might the work of women at home be missing from many history books? How can we recover it?
- What can songs and recipes teach us that written documents cannot?
- How did women such as Doña Gracia and Asenath Barzani lead within the limits of their times?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Chag ha'Banot: An Interfaith North African Hanukkah Celebration of Women (JIMENA, 2020)

youtube.com/watch?v=YL4DzplSgPI

Mizrahi Women Founders in Conversation (JIMENA, 2021)

vimeo.com/595382109

Iranian Jewish Women Across Three Generations, with Dr. Saba Soomekh (JIMENA, 2013)

youtube.com/watch?v=o0j-Z9mOW-E

My Mother Was from Iraq, My Father from Egypt: Rachel Wahba (JIMENA, 2017)

youtube.com/watch?v=sP4QN6xL39Q

"Abyadi Ana," sung by Zohra El Fassia (Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre)

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

Homegrown Plus: Flory Jagoda (Library of Congress)

blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2019/03/homegrown-plus-flory-jagoda

Read

Osnat and Her Dove, by Sigal Samuel, illustrated by Vali Mintzi (Levine Querido, 2021). Picture book about Asenath Barzani.

49thshelf.com/Books/O/Osnat-and-Her-Dove

The Key from Spain: Flory Jagoda and Her Music, by Debbie Levy, illustrated by Sonja Wimmer (Kar-Ben, 2019). Picture book.

lernerbooks.com/shop/show/17905

The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Gracia Nasi, by Andrée Aelion Brooks (Paragon House, 2002)

paragonhouse.com/product/woman-who-defied-kings-the-the-life-and-times-of-f-dona-gracia-nasi

From the Shahs to Los Angeles, by Saba Soomekh (SUNY Press, 2012)

jewishbookcouncil.org/book/from-the-shahs-to-los-angeles-three-generations-of-iranian-jewish-women-between-religion-and

From Distinctions, JIMENA's journal

"Sontinuity: The Tree and the Web," by Vanessa Paloma Elbaz

Women's songs and the survival of Sephardic culture.

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

"I Was an Iranian Jewish Refugee," by Tabby Refael A daughter remembers her family's journey and her mother's Shabbat candles.

distinctionsjournal.org/i-was-an-iranian-jewish-refugee

Explore online

Women and Sephardic Music (Jewish Women's Archive, Judith R. Cohen)

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

Doña Gracia Nasi (Jewish Women's Archive)

jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/nasi-dona-gracia

Zohra El Fassia (Jewish Women's Archive)

jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/fassia-zohra-el

Alliance Israélite Universelle, Teachers of (Jewish Women's Archive)

jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/alliance-israelite-universelle-teachers-of

Mizrahi Feminism in Israel (Jewish Women's Archive)

jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/mizrahi-feminism-in-israel

Who Was Asenath Barazani? (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/who-was-asenath-barazani

Leil Purim: A Kurdish Jewish Women's Holiday (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/leil-purim-a-kurdish-jewish-womens-holiday

Why Rosh Chodesh is Linked to Women (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/women-and-rosh-chodesh

La Fijola: A Baby Naming Ceremony for Girls at Home (University of Washington Sephardic Studies)

jewishstudies.washington.edu/la-fijola-baby-naming-ceremony-girls-home

From JIMENA

Chag HaBanot and Mizrahi Feminism (PDF)

jimena.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Chag-Habanot-and-Mizrahi-Feminism.pdf

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 Jewish Women's Archive, Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women (entries by Judith R. Cohen, Miriam Bodian, Tamar Sella, Frances Malino, and Henriette Dahan-Kalev); the Encyclopaedia Judaica; My Jewish Learning; Peninei Halakha; the Jewish Theological Seminary; the Rossing Center; the University of Washington Sephardic Studies Program; University of Illinois Press; the Hebrew University Jewish Music Research Centre; the National Endowment for the Arts; JTA; and the Library of Congress. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.