

Sephardic Storyteller

Students hear folktales from Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa, analyze how folktales work, and discover the values these stories pass from generation to generation

GRADE AND SETTING

Grades 5 to 8: Jewish day schools, congregational schools, and informal Jewish education; adaptable for ELA

TIME

One 60 minute session, or two 45 minute class periods

APPENDICES

A: Jewish Values Chart
B: Folktale Characteristics Chart
C: The Bird of Happiness
D: Three Short Folktales

Overview

Folktales are stories passed down by word of mouth, carrying a community's values, humor, hopes, and memories from one generation to the next. As author and librarian Sharon Elswit writes, folklore helps "forge a connection between the generations." For centuries, Jews in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, Iraq, and across the Middle East and North Africa told stories at home, in the synagogue, and on holidays. Many were never written down until families who had moved to Israel shared them with the Israel Folktale Archives. In this lesson, students learn the characteristics of folktales, read short tales from Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, listen to an Iraqi Jewish storyteller tell "The Bird of Happiness," and identify the Jewish values each story teaches.

Essential Questions

1. Why do communities tell and retell folktales, and what do these stories preserve?
2. What Jewish values do the folktales of Middle Eastern and North African Jewish communities teach?
3. What can a folktale tell us about the people and places that created it?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Identify six characteristics of folktales and find them in specific stories.
2. Determine the message or lesson of a folktale and support it with details from the text.
3. Name Jewish values (middot) taught in the stories and explain how the plot teaches them.
4. Identify cultural clues that show where and how the storytellers' communities lived.
5. Explain how storytelling and archives preserve the culture of a community.

Curriculum Connections

- **English Language Arts (Common Core):** RL.6.2 and RL.7.2 (determine a theme and how it develops); RL.6.3 (how a plot unfolds and characters respond); RL.7.9 (compare how different stories treat similar

themes); SL.6.1 (collaborative discussion).

- **Jewish Studies:** middot and mussar (Jewish values and ethical character); Jewish life cycle and holidays (Passover, Shabbat); the heritage of Sephardic and Mizrahi communities.

Key Vocabulary

- **Folktale:** a traditional story passed down orally from generation to generation.
- **Oral tradition:** knowledge, stories, and customs passed on by speaking rather than writing.
- **Moral:** the lesson about right and wrong that a story teaches.
- **Middah (plural middot):** a Jewish value or trait of character, such as kindness or humility.
- **Mussar:** the Jewish practice and study of developing good character.
- **Motif:** a repeated element, such as a magical helper or a test, that appears in stories across many cultures.
- **Tzaddik:** a righteous person.
- **Elijah the Prophet (Eliyahu HaNavi):** a biblical prophet who, in Jewish folklore, appears in disguise to help people in need.
- **Israel Folktale Archives (IFA):** an archive at the University of Haifa that collects and preserves Jewish folktales from communities around the world.

Teacher Background

Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa had rich traditions of oral storytelling in Judeo-Arabic, Ladino, Hebrew, and other languages. Stories were told at home, at weddings and holidays, and by professional and amateur storytellers. Common characters include the righteous rabbi or tzaddik, Elijah the Prophet in disguise, clever ordinary people, and kings and wise judges. Many tales share motifs with the stories of the communities' Muslim and Christian neighbors, and with folktales around the world, while giving them Jewish meanings tied to Shabbat, holidays, and Torah.

Between the late 1940s and the 1970s, most Jews left or were forced out of Arab countries, and most resettled in Israel. In 1955, folklorist Dov Noy founded the Israel Folktale Archives to record the stories immigrants brought with them before they were lost. Today the archive, at the University of Haifa, holds more than 20,000 tales from dozens of communities. The three short tales in this lesson come from the archive's collections as published in *Folktales of the Jews, Volume 3: Tales from Arab Lands*, edited by Dan Ben-Amos (Jewish Publication Society). "The Bird of Happiness" is an Iraqi Jewish tale collected in Israel; a published version appears in Howard Schwartz's *Elijah's Violin and Other Jewish Fairy Tales*. Appendix C is a JIMENA retelling for classroom use.

Values in the four stories (teacher key):

- **Reciting Psalms (Tunisia):** emunah and bitachon (faith and trust in God), preparing for the holiday; Elijah rewards devotion.
- **Rabbi Shelomoh the Lion (Morocco):** Torah study, courage, and kindness to animals (tza'ar ba'alei chayim); a motif shared with many cultures' "lion and the thorn" tales.
- **Observing the Sabbath (Egypt):** shemirat Shabbat (keeping Shabbat), trust, and honesty: the merchant keeps his promise and returns the fortune to his friend.
- **The Bird of Happiness (Iraq):** hope, gratitude (hakarat hatov), humility (anavah), justice guided by the Ten Commandments, and remembering where you came from (zikaron).

Sources: Dan Ben-Amos, ed., *Folktales of the Jews, Volume 3: Tales from Arab Lands* (JPS); Israel Folktale Archives, University of Haifa; JTA, "Israeli Folktale Archive Preserves Folklore of Jews from Many Countries" (2005); Sharon Elswit, "The Story

Materials

- Computer, projector, and speakers
- [Audio: "The Bird of Happiness," told by Miriam Kanani](#) (about 10 minutes)
- Optional: Journey to the Mizrah slides, "Jewish Stories and Jewish Values"
- Handouts:
 - [Appendix A: Jewish Values Chart](#) (one per student)
 - [Appendix B: Folktale Characteristics Chart](#) (one per student)
 - [Appendix C: The Bird of Happiness](#) (one per student)
 - [Appendix D: Three Short Folktales](#) (one per pair, or project them)

Note to teacher: You can read one, two, or all three short folktales in Appendix D before the main story, depending on time. "The Bird of Happiness" contains nearly every folktale characteristic on Appendix B, so it works well on its own. Play the audio while students read along in Appendix C; the storyteller's voice is part of the lesson, a reminder that these stories lived first in the telling.

Procedures

Introduction (15 minutes)

- 1 **Communi-story (7 min).** Students sit in a circle and build an improvised story together, one sentence each. Each sentence must connect to the one before it, and the story must come to an ending by the time it returns to the first student.
- 2 **Discuss (8 min).** How did it feel to create a story together? Was it like a folktale or bedtime story? Do you remember stories your parents or grandparents told you? What did they teach, and why were they passed down? What are Jewish values, and where do we learn them?
- 3 **Alternative opening.** Post the essential questions and project a list of Jewish values (Appendix A). Ask: Which values do you recognize? Where did you learn them, and from whom? Explain that Torah and Jewish texts pass on values, and so do stories.

Body of the Lesson (35 minutes)

- 4 **What is a folktale? (5 min).** Hand out Appendices A, B, and C. Explain: folktales are passed down orally, usually feature ordinary people, and teach a moral. In Hebrew, a value or character trait is a *middah*, and the study of good character is *mussar*.
- 5 **Folktale characteristics (5 min).** Review the six characteristics on Appendix B: strong characters, a simple setting, magic or fantasy, a problem that gets solved, cultural clues, and a message or lesson.
- 6 **Short folktales (10 min).** Read one to three tales from Appendix D, from Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt. For each, students check off the characteristics they find and ask: What can we learn about this Jewish community? What values does the story teach?
- 7 **The Bird of Happiness (15 min).** Students follow along in Appendix C while listening to Miriam Kanani tell the Iraqi tale. Pause once, after Aaron finds the glowing stone, and ask students to predict what will happen.

Conclusion (10 minutes)

- 8 Analyze and share.** Individually or in pairs, students complete the Folktale #4 column of Appendix B and circle the values on Appendix A that the story teaches. Students may add a drawing of the image that stayed with them most. Pairs share with the class.
- 9 Reflect.** Ask: Why does King Aaron visit the shack and put on his old clothes? How does the story connect to the history of the Jews who told it, and to the Jewish value of remembering where we came from? Exit ticket: In one sentence, what value would you want to pass on through a story, and why?

Assessment

- **Formative:** the Communi-story discussion, characteristics checked during the short tales, and predictions.
- **Summative:** the completed Folktale #4 column on Appendix B and the exit ticket. A strong response names the story's lesson, supports it with at least two details, connects it to a Jewish value, and identifies one cultural clue about the community that told it.

Differentiation

- **Younger students or English learners:** read only one short tale before the main story; preteach the vocabulary; let students draw responses on Appendix B; provide sentence frames ("This story teaches ___ because ___").
- **Students who need support:** pair students for Appendix B; provide a partially completed chart; replay key parts of the audio.
- **Advanced learners:** compare "Rabbi Shelomoh the Lion" with the Aesop fable "Androcles and the Lion," or research a folktale from another Middle Eastern or North African Jewish community.

Extension Activities

- **Folktales for younger students.** In pairs or groups, students write and illustrate a folktale for a younger class that teaches a Jewish value, using the characteristics on Appendix B. The [Scholastic Folktale Writer's Workshop](#) offers writing tips.
- **Universal and particular.** Students compare Jewish and non-Jewish folktales that share a motif. What lessons do cultures share? What makes each version distinct?
- **Family stories.** Students ask a family member for a story they heard growing up and retell it to the class. Connect to JIMENA's [All-Inclusive Heritage Museum](#) lesson.
- **Explore the archive.** Visit the [Israel Folktale Archives](#) and learn how folklorists collect and preserve stories.

Resources and External Links

- [Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit \(JIMENA\)](http://www.sepharditoolkit.org/)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/
- [Literature: Sephardi and Mizrahi Writers \(Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit\)](http://www.sepharditoolkit.org/recommendation/literature/)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/recommendation/literature/
- [JIMENA: Cultural Heritage, country by country](http://qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage
- [Israel Folktale Archives \(University of Haifa\)](http://ifa.haifa.ac.il/index.php/en/)
ifa.haifa.ac.il/index.php/en/

- [Israeli Folktale Archive Preserves Folklore of Jews from Many Countries \(JTA\)](http://www.jta.org/2005/09/27/archive/israeli-folktale-archive-preserves-folklore-of-jews-from-many-countries)
www.jta.org/2005/09/27/archive/israeli-folktale-archive-preserves-folklore-of-jews-from-many-countries
- [Folktales of the Jews, Volume 3: Tales from Arab Lands \(Jewish Publication Society\)](http://jps.org/books/folktales-of-the-jews-volume-3/)
jps.org/books/folktales-of-the-jews-volume-3/
- [Telling Tales, by Adam Kirsch \(Tablet\)](http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/70398/telling-ales-2)
www.tabletmag.com/jewish-arts-and-culture/books/70398/telling-ales-2
- [The Story Will Out: Why Folktales Still Matter, by Sharon Elswit \(Jewish Book Council\)](http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org/pb-daily/the-story-will-out-why-folktales-still-matter)
www.jewishbookcouncil.org/pb-daily/the-story-will-out-why-folktales-still-matter
- [Using Folktales to Teach Life Lessons and Jewish Values \(PJ Library\)](http://www.pjlibrary.org/beyond-books/pjblog/july-2014/using-folk-ales-to-teach-life-lessons-and-jewish)
www.pjlibrary.org/beyond-books/pjblog/july-2014/using-folk-ales-to-teach-life-lessons-and-jewish
- [Jewish Folktales, lesson plan \(Jewish Learning Matters\)](http://www.jewishlearningmatters.com/Lesson2-Jewish-Folktales-1558.aspx)
www.jewishlearningmatters.com/Lesson2-Jewish-Folktales-1558.aspx
- [Folktale Writer's Workshop \(Scholastic\)](http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/mff/folktalewshop_index.htm)
teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/mff/folktalewshop_index.htm