



Educator's Guide

What's the difference between Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews?

The terms “Sephardic” and “Mizrahi” are often used interchangeably, so what is the difference between these two groups? While “Sephardic” can refer to Iberian origins or a specific set of Jewish ritual practices, and “Mizrahi” historically referred to all non-Ashkenazi Israelis, the choice of which descriptor Jews from the Middle East and North Africa choose to identify with is often even more complicated than that.

Link to video:

<https://unpacked.education/video/whats-the-difference-between-mizrahi-and-sephardic-jews/>

Big Ideas

1. "Sephardic" and "Mizrahi" identities hold deeper meanings beyond just where people come from.
2. Labels can evolve from negative origins to powerful symbols of pride.
3. Mizrahi influence has had and continues to have a profound impact on Israel's culture.

Essential Questions

1. How has migration influenced the evolution and perception of Jewish identities like "Sephardic" and "Mizrahi"?
2. How can a cultural identity be reclaimed after being viewed negatively?
3. How has Mizrahi culture influenced modern-day Israel?

Review Questions

1. What does the term "Sephardic" originally refer to geographically?
 - a. Jews from Eastern Europe
 - b. Jews from North Africa



- c. **Jews from the Iberian Peninsula**
 - d. Jews from the Middle East
- 2. How does the term "Mizrahi" translate?
 - a. Western
 - b. Northern
 - c. **Eastern**
 - d. Southern
- 3. Apart from geography, what else does the term "Sephardic" denote?
 - a. A political movement
 - b. **A specific worldview on how to observe Judaism**
 - c. A dietary restriction
 - d. A language dialect
- 4. Which historical event greatly affected Sephardic Jewry in Spain during the 15th century?
 - a. The Renaissance
 - b. The Kishinev Pogrom
 - c. **The decree by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella making Spain a Jew-free zone**
 - d. The founding of the State of Israel
- 5. Why did the Israeli establishment label Jews from Arab or Muslim countries as "Mizrahim"?
 - a. **To differentiate them from the Ashkenazi Jews**
 - b. Because they all spoke the same language
 - c. As a term of respect and honor
 - d. Because they all followed the same religious customs
- 6. In Israel's early years, the cultural establishment suppressed which culture?
 - a. Ashkenazi
 - b. European
 - c. **Mizrahi**
 - d. American
- 7. What was the primary message of Israel's Black Panthers (HaPanterim HaShchorim)?
 - a. Promoting Ashkenazi culture
 - b. **Advocating for equal rights and treatment for Mizrahi Jews**



- c. Promoting peace between Israel and its neighbors
 - d. Encouraging Jewish immigration to Israel
- 8. Why might a Jew from Aleppo living in France refer to himself as Sephardic instead of Mizrahi?**
- a. Because of his culinary preferences
 - b. Because he speaks Yiddish
 - c. Because of the influence and perception of labels in non-majority Jewish countries**
 - d. Because he doesn't believe in the State of Israel

Discussion Questions

1. Israel: Melting pot or mosaic?

Prime Minister Menachem Begin called for unity "Ashkenazi! Iraqi! Jews! Brothers! Warriors!" in a now famous [1981 speech](#). Begin believed in the strength of Jewish unity as well as Jewish diversity. Today, over half of Israel's [Jewish population](#) is Mizrahi (of Middle Eastern origin). Jews of all backgrounds and ethnicities have come together in the modern State of Israel.

- What is stronger: the shared Jewish roots of various groups or the specific cultures that each group arrived with?
- What are some ways that immigrants can maintain their cultural uniqueness, while still feeling part of a blended, Israeli society?
- What is the best way to bring different Jewish communities together?

2. Making lemonade:

Many Jewish communities were formed as a result of discrimination, or other types of hardship, such as the Spanish expulsion in 1492, which caused Sephardic Jews to migrate to places all over the globe. Yet, the communities they formed became vibrant centers of Jewish life.

- How do you think these Jews were able to find the strength to start their lives anew?
- What factors might have inspired them to keep their Judaism alive?
- Should we view the expulsions purely as negative events, or do they also hold some positive value?

3. Sephardic or Mizrahi?

Based on the historical information you learned in the video, discuss whether labels like "Sephardic" and "Mizrahi" should be kept, changed, or phased out.



- Are these terms still relevant in today's Jewish world?
- Considering the challenging roots of the word Mizrahi, should it still be used as a label?
- Can we take back a cultural term and use it proudly? Does it matter who is using the term?

Ask students to share their thoughts on this issue, and then to partner with someone with an opposite opinion. After hearing both sides of the argument, ask students if their original opinions have changed or stayed the same.

4. Jewish indigeneity in the Middle East:

Writer Matti Friedman [writes](#): "That we are free, safe from persecution, and in charge of ourselves—these things are new. But that we are here [in the Middle East]? There is nothing new about that at all."

- How does this quote relate to Mizrahi Jews?
- How might you connect this quote to some of the ideas shared in the Unpacked video about Mizrahi Jews?
- What do you think is the most important message from this quote?

Learning Activities

1. Lesson plan:

Use our ready made lesson plan on the differences between Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews [HERE](#).

2. Research:

Choose a Sephardic or Mizrahi community in Israel or the Diaspora and research their history and traditions (ex: Iraqi, Egyptian, Syrian, Yemenite, Bucharian, Iranian...). Students can also use the Anu Museum's [database](#), which contains information about Jewish communities all over the world. Students should create a slideshow which should showcase the following elements:

- History and origins of the community
- Food, music and culture
- Holiday, life cycle events and unique customs
- Famous members of the community
- Are there still Jews in this area? If so, what is Jewish life like? If not, where did they go?



- The community's current situation (where does the community reside today etc)
- Does this community refer to themselves as Sephardic or Mizrahi? Why?

3. Mizrahi music:

Send your students our [Spotify](#) or [YouTube](#) playlist of Mizrahi pop songs and tell your students to listen to the playlist while on a walk or during a workout.

Afterwards, ask them to share which song was their favorite and why. Then, watch our Mizrahi music [video](#) and ask your students:

- What is something that surprised you about this video?
- How has the acceptance of Mizrahi music changed in Israel?
- What does Israel's "middle easternization" mean for Israel's place in the Middle East?
- Do you view Israel as more of a Western country, Middle Eastern country or something else?

4. Movie night:

Host a movie night at school and watch the film "[The Unorthodox](#)" with your students about the rise of the Shas movement in Israel. You can serve traditional food representing different Sephardic and Mizrahi groups and use this as an additional teaching moment about the cultural diversity of the Jewish people.

Then, debrief with your students using the following questions:

- What surprised you about the film?
- What were some of the challenges faced by Mizrahi Jews in the film?
- How was the founding of the Shas party supposed to fix that?
- Compare the film with this [Shas party video](#) from a previous Israeli election. How does this election video focus on restoring Mizrahi and Sephardic pride?

5. Interview project:

Sephardic Jews fanned out across the world, taking their traditions and worldview with them. To the Netherlands. To England. To Asia, Africa and the Americas. And there, Sephardic traditions influenced and mingled with existing Jewish customs.

Interview: Imagine that you have the opportunity to interview a member of one of these Jewish communities. Consider what you know about the community, and what you would like to learn more about. Write down your goals for your



interview. Then, make a [list](#) of four to six questions that you would like to ask this individual. Make sure that your questions are relevant to the specific community that you chose.

- 6. Kahoot:** Play our Kahoot about the differences between Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews [HERE!](#)

Reflection Questions

1. Troubling comments from David Ben-Gurion:

Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, shared a similar attitude towards Mizrahim as did many from the Ashkenazi leadership of the state in Israel's early years. He said "Those [Jews] from Morocco had no education. Their customs are those of Arabs...The culture of Morocco I would not like to have here...We don't want Israelis to become Arabs." Put yourself in the shoes of a Moroccan Jew who had recently made aliyah to Israel. What do you think would be your reaction to hearing a comment like this from Israel's first prime minister?

2. Family history:

If you are Jewish, what is your background (Mizrahi, Sephardic, Ashkenazi, Ethiopian, Yemenite etc)? Do you know where your Jewish ancestors came from? How far back can you trace your family history? Do you have any special religious practices or customs that your family has maintained over the generations? In what ways, if at all, has your family background influenced your Jewish identity? Set up a sharing circle to hear from your students.

3. The challenge of labels:

- How does the concept of labels apply to your own life and identity? Are there labels you identify with that carry complex meanings, and how do they shape your perception of yourself and others?
- Reflect on the statement "identities are messy." Why do you think we naturally group and label things, even when people's identities are so diverse and complex?

Further Learning

1. Unpacked for Educators:

- [Mizrahi Jews](#)
- [The Spanish Inquisition](#)



- [Immigration Nation](#)
 - [The Israeli Black Panthers](#)
 - [The Story of Israel's Black Panthers](#) (podcast)
 - [Jews in the Ottoman Empire](#)
 - [How Mizrahi Music took over Israeli Pop](#)
 - [Rescuing the Wandering Jews](#)
2. Matti Friedman, "[Nobody hijacked Israel. It's just not what its pioneers thought they'd created](#)", Times of Israel. *This article discusses how Israel navigates the distance between the vision of Israel's Ashkenazi European founders, and its current, multicultural and heavily Mizrahi society.*
 3. [Jimena](#) - Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa
 4. [Anu Museum](#) - A searchable database of Jewish communities and family names throughout the world.
 5. The Forgotten Refugees (film): [Longer version](#) and [shorter version](#). A film about the Jews expelled from Arab countries in the 1940's and 50's.
 6. [The Unorthodox](#) (film): A drama/comedy about the rise of the Shas movement in Israel.