



Educator's Guide

Who Was the Last Jew in Afghanistan?

Resources compiled by Doug Berkowitz

The history of Jews in Afghanistan is shrouded in myth. From the Pashtun legend of Lost Tribe origin to the Jewish communal escape from Iran, one thing is clear: Jews have had a presence in Afghanistan for at least 1,000 years. But the story of the last Jew in Afghanistan remains the most well known. Or so you thought.

Link to video: <https://unpacked.education/video/who-was-the-last-jew-in-afghanistan/>

Big Ideas

1. At one time there was a thriving Jewish community in Afghanistan.
2. Israel offered a safe haven for Jews who were being persecuted in Afghanistan.
3. Jewish history is full of both expulsions and new beginnings.

Essential Questions

1. Is there value to having a "last Jew" in a country?
2. Do entertaining stories about "last Jews" diminish the trauma they experienced for being Jews?
3. How much Jewish history is lost when Jews are forced to leave a country?

Review Questions

1. Zebulon Simentov claimed he was kicked out of a Taliban jail for...
 - Trying to convert the guards
 - **Fighting with a rabbi**
 - Demanding kosher food
 - Starting a riot



- 2.** An Afghan group that converted to Islam claims to be descended from a group called...
 - **Bani Israel**
 - B'nei Moshe
 - Beta Israel
 - Sons of Aaron

- 3.** Local legend claims that Afghanistan's capital city, Kabul, is named for whom?
 - Canaan
 - Bilhah
 - **Cain and Abel**
 - Habakkuk

- 4.** Which well-known ruler is responsible for destroying Afghanistan's Jewish community?
 - Napoleon
 - Joseph Stalin
 - Montezuma
 - **Genghis Khan**

- 5.** Jews fleeing religious intolerance in Persia found Afghanistan to be a safe haven.
 - True
 - **False**

- 6.** An example of a way in which the Afghan government mistreated Jews in the early 1900s is...
 - They refused to issue new passports to Jews
 - They confiscated Jews' IDs
 - They stopped Jews from sending letters abroad
 - **All of the above**

- 7.** Under Jewish law, who can grant a divorce?
 - **The husband**
 - The wife
 - Either the husband or the wife



- Neither, divorces are not allowed in Judaism

8. The last Jews left Afghanistan in the aftermath of which event?

- The establishment of the modern State of Israel (1948)
- The Gulf War (1991)
- **American troops leaving Afghanistan (2021)**
- The Six-Day War (1967)

Discussion Questions

1. Solo Judaism?

Zebulon Simentov, the “last Jew” in Afghanistan, preserved the last synagogue in Afghanistan, but the Taliban confiscated the Torah scroll and made it hard to practice.

- Considering that Judaism relies heavily on community, do you think it’s possible to practice Judaism alone?
- Which traditions would a “last Jew” be able to observe?
- Which ones would a “last Jew” be unable to observe?
- If you were a “last Jew”, how would you feel observing traditions by yourself? Would you prefer to be in a community? Explain your answers.

2. Lost history

Zebulon Simentov said he was unwilling to “let Jewish history die in Afghanistan.”

Journalist Dara Horn stated that after Jews leave or are expelled from an area, “Often, thousands of years of history are completely erased.”

- Do you think one person can keep the Jewish history of a place alive?
- Do you think history can get lost? Why or why not? What do you think about that?
- Are there any parts of Jewish history which are lost that you wish we knew about or knew more about? What are they? Why did you choose these time periods?



3. Loving your country

Tova Moradi, the actual “last Jew” in Afghanistan, fled after the Taliban regained power in August 2021. She stated, “I loved my country, loved it very much, but had to leave because my children were in danger.”

- What are some reasons that Tova may have loved Afghanistan?
 - Do you think her personal history, including marrying a Muslim man influenced her feelings?
- Do you think other Jews who fled Afghanistan felt a similar love for the country they left?
- Do you think that you could love a country that treated your people so poorly that they all fled for other places?

Learning Activities

1. Lesson plan

Use our ready made lesson plan on The Last Jews in Afghanistan [HERE](#).

2. Seeking refuge in Israel

Most Jews of Afghanistan fled the country following the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948. Things continued to grow worse for the Jews who remained in Afghanistan and they also left the country to seek refuge elsewhere.

The Jews of Afghanistan were neither the first nor the last group from the Jewish Diaspora to seek a safe haven in Israel. Ask students to form groups and research groups of Jews who made *aliyah*.

Some groups to research include:

- [Ethiopian Jewry](#)
- [The First Aliyah \(1882-1903\)](#)
- [The Second Aliyah \(1904-1914\)](#)
- [Aliyah Bet \(1939-1948\)](#)
- [Jewish Refugees from Arab Countries](#)



Groups of students should prepare a presentation for the class on the selected group of Jews who made *aliyah*. The presentation should include information such as:

- Which group they chose to research.
- The years during which the *aliyah* took place.
- What countries they were leaving.
- Reasons for making *aliyah*.
- Three unique facts about this group.

3. Preserving your Jewish history

Split students into small groups and have them complete the following activity: Suppose that one day, there are no more Jews living in your area. The history of Jewish life in your area would be at risk of being forgotten! In order to preserve the memory of your Jewish community, compile a time-capsule of aspects of Jewish life that you think are most important. In other words, what do you think people in the future should know about your Jewish community?

This can include the following:

- Pictures or information about important people.
- Community-specific traditions/rituals.
- Important objects or pictures of places.
- Anything else you deem worthy of inclusion.

Including photos and/or props is encouraged.

When finished, ask groups to present their time-capsule to the class.

4. Give your students our Kahoot on [The Last Jews in Afghanistan!](#)

Reflection Questions

1. Seeking refuge

- If you lived in a country in which you suffered persecution at the hands of the government, what do you think you would do? Would you stay and try to change the conditions within the country OR attempt to flee? Explain your answer?



- Jews in Persia sought refuge in Afghanistan when Iranian rulers forced Jews to convert to Islam. Do you think it would be worth fleeing to another country if you knew that conditions there weren't good either? Why or why not?

2. Would you be the last Jew?

Imagine that you were the last Jew in your country. Do you think you would want to stay OR would you want to leave and go elsewhere?

If you would stay:

- What are the factors that led you to this decision? (e.g., preserving Jewish presence in the area; acting as caretaker for the Jewish buildings and grounds; not wanting to give in to antisemitism; etc.)
- Does any one factor weigh more heavily on your decision than the others?

If you would leave:

- How would you choose where to go?
- Would it be important to you that there is a Jewish community in your new country? Why or why not?
- Would you consider making *aliyah* to Israel? Why or why not? Where does Israel rank in your list of countries that you'd want to move to?
 - Why do you think the majority of Afghanistan's Jews didn't flee the country until after the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948?

3. Remembering the good

When we hear about characters such as "last Jew" Zebulon Simentov, we tend to laugh at his stories and forget about the dark history that led to him becoming the last Jew in Afghanistan. Jews have a tendency to turn hardship into humor, making light of even the most serious traumas, yet this phenomenon of remembering the good can be observed in many people.

- What are some examples from history in which we tend to remember the good aspects and minimize or forget the bad aspects?
- Are there any moments or periods in your life in which you observe this phenomenon? What are they?



- Why do you think there could be a tendency to forget negative aspects of the past and instead focus on positive aspects?
- Do you think this phenomenon might contribute to the loss of some aspects of Jewish history? If so, in what ways?

Further Learning

1. Unpacked for Educators:
 - [Afghanistan's last Jew is staying \(for personal reasons\) - Unpacked](#) (article)
 - [Whereabouts of Afghanistan's last remaining Jew unknown after Taliban takeover](#) (article)
 - [What does the fall of Afghanistan mean for Israel? • Unpacked for Educators](#) (article)
 - [The Immigration Nation](#) (video)
 - [Jews and Comedy](#) (video)
2. Jewish Virtual Library, [Afghanistan Virtual Jewish History Tour](#) (article)
This article gives an overview of Jewish history in Afghanistan.
3. Jewish Virtual Library, [Aliyah](#) (article)
This article discusses the significance of *aliyah* and gives a brief overview of *aliyah* over time.
4. My Jewish Learning, [Modern Aliyah | My Jewish Learning](#) (article)
This article reviews reasons why Jews choose to make *aliyah* in the 21st century.