

GREECE

Jewish History of Greece

Jewish life in Greece dates back almost 2,500 years and has existed under the Greek, Roman, and Ottoman Empires. Comprised of Sephardic Jews, who fled Spain in 1492, and Romaniote Jews, who trace their links to Greece for over two millennia, Greek Jews today preserve their unique culture.

Before World War II, the city of Thessaloniki was once almost 50 percent Jewish, with the ports closed for Shabbat. Salonika was a center of Sephardic culture and they spoke Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), the main language of the Jews. Though Greek Jewry was almost destroyed by the Nazis during World War II, a



A Jewish survivor in his shop. Greece, 1949.

vibrant Jewish community continues to this day. The community is led by Rabbi Gabriel Negrin, one of the youngest chief rabbis in the world, and the Jewish day school in Athens is a communal gem.

JDC Fact: In 1917, after a fire nearly destroyed the entire city of Salonika, JDC entered Greece to assist in the city's rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Community Story

Excerpted from “Breathing New Life into Greece’s Small but Historic Jewish Community”

Tablet, April 24, 2014

Suzanne Senegut, Storyteller

Growing up in Athens, Gabriel Negrin revered his grandfather and the elders in the Greek capital’s Jewish community, who chanted prayers in distinctive Greek melodies. Now 25, that “little rabbi” is preparing to become Greece’s chief rabbi.

“I’m very excited to revive the Greek Jewish tradition, and also to renew it...to make it work for people today, who are living a modern life.

Today, when I tell people I am a Jew from Greece, they look at me as exotic and that’s so wrong because Greece was such an important Jewish center. I want to continue that great line of Greek-Jewish tradition and modernize it.

I want to show them that music, food, singing, dancing, how you talk and act are all parts of being Jewish. It is so much more than a set of laws; it is a way of life.

Diaspora is a Greek word, and it means spreading seeds. I don’t believe the Jewish people are in exile anymore. We need a strong center of Judaism in Israel, but we also need to spread Jewish messages throughout the world. That’s my hope for our community’s future—that we can be a part of that effort.”

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Negrin’s story speak to the importance of *kavannah* (Hebrew for intention)?”
2. What *kavannah* did you bring to our Seder tonight?
3. What kind of Jewish messages do you wish to share?

POLAND

Jewish History of Poland

The history of Jews in Poland goes back over 1,000 years—Poland was home to the largest Jewish community in the world and represented the ideological and religious diversity of the Jewish people. World War II saw its decimation, with more than 3 million Polish Jews murdered in the Holocaust.

Though many Polish Jews emigrated in 1968 due to anti-Semitic persecution, the community remained strong and experienced a revitalization after the fall of the Soviet Union. Many Poles discovered Jewish ancestry and reconnected with their roots, and cities throughout the country hosted Jewish and Yiddish festivals to honor the legacy of Polish Jewry.



Assembled for a Passover meal. Poland, 1960s.

In 2022, Polish Jewry played a heroic role in welcoming Ukrainian refugees, with Jewish Community Centers and JDC staff in Warsaw and Krakow leading the communal response. A building that once housed a yeshiva, a Jewish learning institution, in Lublin—only to be occupied by the Nazis and then taken over by the Communists—became a safe haven for refugees, thus representing the travails and rebirth of this essential Jewish community.

JDC Fact: JDC stayed covertly active during the Holocaust and helped fund the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943.

Community Story

Excerpted from **“Passover in Krakow: Jewish Revival in Poland”**

Jerusalem Post, March 27, 2013

Nissan Tzur, Storyteller

Guests sat around tables laden with traditional Passover dishes and kosher Israeli wine and matza, and listened to the Haggadah in Hebrew and Polish.

“We had a lot of interest, and we had more than 150 guests... We had people of all ages, from a six-week-old baby to a 90-year-old guest,” Jonathan Ornstein, head of the Krakow JCC said.

According to Ornstein, the Monday night event was ***“the biggest Seder we have had so far. We even had to split the Seder into two parts, and we accommodated people in the reception area, in the hall, and even had to take some doors off to give us more space. David Pash, who led the Seder, asked me how we would open the door to invite Elijah if we had taken them all off the hinges. When I think about the Seder this year, that so many local Jews wanted to come... It’s heart-warming.”***

He also sees the significance in celebrating Passover in a place that is most often associated with the biggest Jewish tragedy in history.

“I know how we are supposed to feel about the time when the Jews left Egypt, but when I look around this room and see 15 or 20 Holocaust survivors sitting together for Passover Seder, I think: These people really did come out of slavery.”

Discussion Questions:

1. Jonathan notes the importance of seeing people who had a shared experience come together for Passover. How is our Seder *kehillah* (Hebrew for community) enriched by both common and unique experiences?
2. What role does the value of *kehillah* play in having a meaningful Seder?
3. In what ways have you felt part of the global Jewish community during our Seder today?

ARGENTINA

Jewish History of Argentina

The Argentine Jewish community emerged in 1816 after Argentina gained its independence from Spain. The Jewish population boomed in the late 19th century with the arrival of Ashkenazi Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe who were drawn by Argentina's open immigration policy. The German Jewish philanthropist Baron Maurice de Hirsch funded agricultural settlements, leading to the rise of Jewish Gauchos.

Argentine Jewry has had its moments of tragedy: bombings of the Israeli embassy in 1992 and the Jewish community center (AMIA) in Buenos Aires in 1994, and the 2001 financial crisis plunged 35,000 of the country's Jews into poverty overnight, with many experiencing joblessness and hunger for the first time.

Today, Argentina is home to the largest Jewish community in South America, largely concentrated in Buenos Aires. There are sprawling

Jewish Community Centers, schools, synagogues and other cultural institutions that host dynamic Jewish life. Rabbinical students study at Reform and Conservative movement schools and go on to serve communities throughout Latin America.



Seder at Buenos Aires JCC. Argentina, 2003.

JDC Fact: Today, a new effort in Latin America aims to empower women in Jewish communal institutions to take on leadership positions, network with peers, forge cross-border connections, and acquire new tools for activating women in their home communities.

Community Story

Excerpted from “Argentine Jews enjoy ‘Passover Together’”

JTA, April 2, 2002

Florencia Arbiser, Storyteller

Around Argentina, 15,021 Jews enjoyed ‘Passover Together’ seders, which were intended mainly for those who couldn’t afford to make seders at home because of the country’s economic crisis.

Through JDC, 5,000 Spanish Haggadahs, 5,000 yarmulkes inscribed with the words **“Passover Together,”** liters of kosher wine, matzah and seder plates were distributed across the country. **“Just as in ancient times, Passover symbolizes the freedom of the Jews,”** Steven Schwager, JDC’s Chief Operating Officer, told JTA from New York. **“In the past it was freedom from slavery, today in Argentina it’s from the economic crisis.”**

Holocaust survivor Greta Krauss, 72, found links between her past and her present reality.

“And I am still here today, celebrating as I can, as I feel. This dinner given me tonight, the possibility of being with all these people, knowing that care was taken even to provide me a taxi to go back home — all these supportive, understanding, good people,” Krauss said, picking up her wineglass for a toast **“to life.”**

Rabbi Sergio Bergman, who oversaw the Libertad seder, also praised the impulse behind the event. **“Despite all the problems, this is the celebration of freedom, life, memory and remembering slavery,”** he told the crowd. **“This celebration makes us be together, see each other, talk, explain to our children, share. We all know that share is to distribute, and that is the sense of this ‘Passover Together.’”**

Discussion Questions:

1. What role did the value of *arevut* (Hebrew for mutual responsibility) play in the Libertad seder?
2. How does *arevut* shape the way you express your Jewish identity day-to-day?
3. One of the major themes of Passover is redemption. Our Jewish ancestors were both physically and spiritually liberated so that they might achieve their full potential. How is our mutual responsibility to the global Jewish community tied up in the idea of redemption?

INDIA

Jewish History of India

According to tradition, the first Jews arrived in India when King Solomon ruled in the land of Israel over 2,000 years ago. Known as Bene Israel, they found a welcoming home in India, as have Jews from Baghdad and other Jewish populations that immigrated over the centuries. Due to the prohibitions on Hindu and Muslim women from singing in public, Jewish women took on prominent roles in Bollywood, revolutionizing the industry. It is remarkable that a community that represents .00001% of India has had such a substantial impact.

Today, the Jewish community is concentrated in Mumbai. The Jewish Community Center hosts a variety of programs, including Khai Fest, a youth-led Hanukkah program that showcases the talents of the

community. Every year, a cohort of Indian Jews attends Szarvas, JDC's international Jewish summer camp in Hungary, building bridges with global Jewry.



Passover Seder in a home for the aged. India, 1997.

JDC Fact: JDC partners with Gabriel Project Mumbai, a volunteer organization that brings Indian and international Jewish volunteers, educational support and medical care to the Kalwa slum of Mumbai.

Community Story

Excerpted from “Biblical Rituals and Spicy Biryani”

Haaretz, Apr 19, 2016

Shulamit Shaulker Madnick, Storyteller

My mom was born in Byculla [in India] and lived there with her family from the early 1940s through the early 1960s. Growing up, she often accompanied my grandfather, who worked for the railway, on trips to the kosher butcher shop before holidays, special occasions and sometimes also on Fridays. The kosher butcher shop was located within a small meat market in Bandra, a nearby neighborhood, where they bought choice cuts of goat or lamb.

For the Seder in India, the Bene Israel community [India's oldest Jewish community] had its own illustrated Passover Haggadot, written in Marathi [one of India's languages] and Hebrew. The first Bene Israel Bombay Haggadah was printed (lithographed) in 1846; a second illustrated Haggadah came out of Poona in 1874, the second largest center of the Bene Israel, after Mumbai.

I felt spiritually connected to my ancestry in India at the sight of the tattered original 1874 Poona Haggadah at the Library of Congress. Reverently leafing through the frayed pages adorned with Marathi and Hebrew, and burnt at the edges, I was transported to another time and place, walking in my mother's shoes, running through her grandparents' village in India, later attending nursing school. Imagining myself walking with her and my grandfather to that butcher shop in Bandra, that is by now long gone.

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think was important for Shulamit to remember in the story of her mother's upbringing?
2. *Zachor* (Hebrew for remembrance) takes on many forms: people, songs, rituals, food, and more. What memories do you try to honor at your Seder and how do you honor them?
3. How does this historical memory connect us to the global Jewish community?

SARAJEVO

Jewish History of Sarajevo

When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, they found new homes throughout the world, notably in the Ottoman Empire. Soon, Sarajevo, the current capital of Bosnia, became a center of Sephardic Jewish life. Sarajevo's Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) speaking Jewish community was devastated by the Holocaust, but survivors were committed to rebuilding their once vibrant Jewish life.

The outbreak of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992 led to the Siege of Sarajevo, one of the longest sieges in modern history, which threatened the city's Muslims, Christians and Jews. In this war that turned neighbor against neighbor, the Jewish community's neutrality allowed it to establish a critical supply channel to

the besieged city, offering hot food and medicine to all who needed it. With help from JDC, 2,100 residents of all faiths were evacuated from the city.

Today, Sarajevo's Jews continue to live harmoniously with their neighbors in a multicultural, multilingual city that has a church, mosque, and synagogue within walking distance of the city center.



Interfaith Seder. Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1995.

JDC Fact: Today, young Jews in Sarajevo engage in pan-European programs through JDC Junction where they learn how to lead their community into the future.

Community Story

Excerpted from “Survival in Sarajevo:
Remembering Passover in a War Zone”

Haaretz, April 2, 2015

Edward Serrota, Storyteller

As Bosnian Serb forces swept across the outer suburbs of Sarajevo and were approaching the National Museum, its director, Enver Imamovic, snatched the Sarajevo Haggadah, one of the oldest and most beautifully illustrated Sephardic manuscripts, from its hiding place and took it to safety. From that moment on, no one knew where the Haggadah had gone. Some said it had been sold off for arms. One rumor said it was in a bank vault in Israel. All that was known was that while most Jews had fled Sarajevo in the early days of the war, a tiny band of Holocaust survivors and their offspring took the opening words of the Sarajevo Haggadah — and every other Haggadah — and put them to work: **“All who are hungry, let them come and eat. All who are in need of fellowship, let them come and celebrate Passover with us.”**

In 1995, an interfaith seder brought together Christians, Jews and Muslims at a time of deep strife and tragic violence along with this cultural treasure. As these words were read out from the Sarajevo Haggadah, Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic, standing next to Jakob Finci and Ivica Ceresnjes, who were heading the Sarajevo Jewish community's non-sectarian humanitarian aid agency La Benevolencija, craned his neck a little to look at this small book, which bore the name of his beloved city, and had become a symbol of hope for everyone, no matter what their religion. He shrugged, he sat down, and the seder commenced.

Until that day, I had always believed that Passover lasted eight days. During the siege of Sarajevo, in that faded old synagogue, it lasted more than three years.

Discussion Questions:

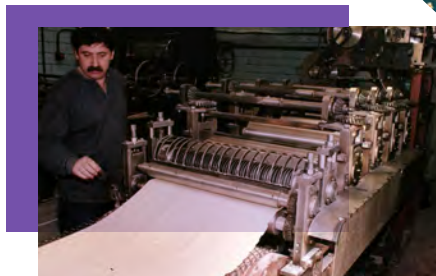
1. Let's revisit the opening words of the Haggadah: “All who are hungry, let them come and eat. All who are in need of fellowship, let them come and celebrate Passover with us.” How do we uphold this ideal at our Seder?
2. How does the value of *hachnosat orchim* (Hebrew for hospitality) fit into your vision of fully embracing Jewish values?
3. These words were read at an interfaith Seder in 1995. How might interfaith hospitality strengthen our global Jewish community?

UKRAINE

Jewish History of Ukraine

Jewish presence in Ukraine dates back to the 10th century and has been the source of some of the most consequential religious and political developments of the Jewish people. Hasidism, a Jewish mystical tradition, and Zionism, the push for Jewish self determination, were both born in Ukraine. After World War II, the Soviets banned Jewish life and suppressed Jewish identity for over 70 years. With the fall of the Iron Curtain, Ukrainian Jews reconnected to their roots and formed strong institutions that emphasized youth engagement and dedicated volunteerism.

The ongoing crisis in Ukraine has severely impacted Ukrainian Jews and Jewish communities across the country. The majority of the country's Jews remained while others fled to neighboring countries where local European Jewish communities and JDC have deployed robust resources to care for refugees. Some have remained in neighboring countries but more have returned to Ukraine where they face dire living



Jewish communities in the former Soviet Union were able to return to producing their own Matzah openly. Kiev, Ukraine 1994.

conditions. JDC has leveraged its experience in crisis response and its longstanding infrastructure, institutions, and professional and volunteer corps in the Ukrainian Jewish community to provide hundreds of tons of humanitarian aid and Jewish communal programming for tens of thousands of Jews within the country.

JDC Fact: JDC has provided continuous, lifesaving care to 43,000 Ukrainian Jews, including elderly Jews who live on pensions as low as two dollars a day, needy families, internally displaced Jews, and those plunged into poverty as a result of the conflict.

Community Story

Anastasia // Odesa, Ukraine

When Anastasia found safety in Moldova, she became a JDC volunteer. Now she's helping refugees just like her who are also fleeing violence in Ukraine. "The day the conflict started, I got up and went to work. I felt restless, as if I sensed that something was going on but didn't understand what. At the office, I saw an explosion right in front of my eyes — everything caught on fire. And I realized that the conflict wouldn't end soon. I packed all my things in half an hour and headed towards the border. On the way, I saw huge lines — at the gas station, the ATM — and a panic set in. When I arrived in Moldova, I thought about the difficult situation in Odesa and across Ukraine and decided that I had to help. So I became a JDC volunteer and started helping prepare food and keep the elderly company. Now that we've set up a little kindergarten, I help with the kids. Here, with JDC, I feel needed and useful — it's important for me to help. That's my mission now."

Klara // Odesa, Ukraine

Klara was living in Odesa, Ukraine, when the conflict started. That's when she turned to JDC, who helped coordinate her evacuation to Vadul Lui Voda, Moldova. "When the war forced me to leave Odesa, I called JDC, and they helped me immediately: The very next morning, they had organized my transport out of Ukraine. We crossed the border quickly, and I took a bus to Vadul Lui Voda, Moldova, where I'm currently staying. Now I'm safe — I am warm and have good clothes. But I'm worried, too. My husband, who is 70, and my grandson, 28, both stayed behind. I wanted to stay with my husband, but he insisted that I leave. What keeps me going is the hope that I will meet my family again, when the war ends. I want to thank everyone who helped us here in Moldova — the volunteers, the people who received us, who gave us shelter and food. There should be peace. Peace for all. For everyone."

Discussion Questions:

1. How did the individuals affected by the crisis in Ukraine take action?
2. How does the value of *assiyah* (Hebrew for action) continuously liberate us in our day to day lives?
3. What action does Passover compel us to take during the rest of the year?

ETHIOPIA

Jewish History of Ethiopia

Ethiopian Jewish history dates back millennia. According to tradition, Ethiopian Jews view the relationship between King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba as the beginning of their community. Some of the unique aspects of Jewish life in Ethiopia include the celebration of Sigd — a holiday that occurs 50 days after Yom Kippur that celebrates the receiving of the Torah (the Jewish bible). They also celebrate Passover by breaking previously used dishes and preparing new dishes, free of chametz, or food forbidden on Passover.

With the dawn of communism in the 1970s, this ancient Jewish community found itself under threat. As famines and civil wars increased across Ethiopia over the next two decades, the situation became dire. After the



An Ethiopian Kess (Jewish religious leader) holding a box of matzah delivered by JDC. Ethiopia, 1988.

Israeli embassy reopened in 1990, thousands of Jews hoping to go to Israel poured into Addis Ababa from all over rural Ethiopia. JDC facilitated Operation Solomon's 36-hour airlift of over 14,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel. The airlift set a world record for the number of people on a plane, with some babies even being born enroute.

JDC Fact: JDC remains connected to Ethiopia through Tikkun Olam Ventures (TOV), which combines Israeli agricultural technology with a sound business model to bring prosperity to smallholder farmers.

Community Story

Excerpted from “Operation Solomon:
The Daring Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews”
2006

Stephen Spector, Storyteller

When the first plane left Addis for Israel that afternoon, Dan’el, an Ethiopian-Israeli who returned to Ethiopia to assist with Operation Solomon, was on board. *“There were no chairs, only mattresses,”* he said. *“Everyone stood till the plane was full. ‘Now you can sit down,’”* he told them. *“Everyone was so quiet,”* he recalled. *“They just wanted to go and not make a problem. Even the children didn’t cry.”* Dan’el told the new immigrants, *“In three and a half hours we will be in Israel.”* That struck them as unlikely. It had taken their relatives months or years to reach Jerusalem. *“Who are you to say that in three and a half hours we will be in Israel?”* they asked him. *“All flights went over the Red Sea,”* Dan’el told me. *“The second exodus. Moses crossed the Red Sea on foot. Now we crossed it on air.”* Finally, Dan’el announced, *“Now we are in Israel airspace. On the left side is Jerusalem.”* All of the passengers stood at once and looked out the windows on the left of the plane. *“I was afraid we maybe lost balance, you know?”* he remembered, smiling. When they landed, *“I told them, ‘Welcome to the Holy Land. You are in Israel.’ You can see the shining of the faces,”* Dan’el recalled.

Discussion Questions:

1. The stories of Exodus and Operation Solomon are both full of *ometz lev* (Hebrew for courage). At what moment(s) in each story do you see people choosing *ometz lev*? How do we uphold this ideal at our Seder?
2. In what ways does *ometz lev* come up in your day-to-day life? How do you call upon *ometz lev* in moments that require it?
3. How might *ometz lev* connect us to the global Jewish community?

MOROCCO

Jewish History of Morocco

Moroccan Jewry dates back to 70 C.E. with the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. In 1492, it became a refuge for Sephardic Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition. Almost 500 years later, the country was one of the few to allow in European Jews fleeing Nazi Europe.

This ancient Jewish minority has lived alongside its Muslim neighbors, presenting a hopeful and little-known story of coexistence. Interestingly, the Moroccan constitution speaks specifically of the significant “Hebraic” influence on the country. Today, the community is primarily located in Casablanca, and is full of rich Jewish culture that includes kosher restaurants, Jewish day schools, and synagogues. Mimouna, an interfaith

partnership between Moroccan Muslims and Jews, has worked to preserve the history of ancient Moroccan Jewish life and celebrate the substantial Jewish contribution to this nation.



A family Seder in a home in Morocco. Casablanca, Morocco 1960.

JDC Fact: JDC supported H  l  ne Cazes Benatar, the first female lawyer in Morocco, as she aided thousands of European Jewish refugees during World War II.

Community Story

Excerpted from “Jews Under Moroccan Skies:
Two Thousand Years of Jewish Life”

2012

Raphael David Elmaleh and George Rickets, Storytellers

“We recall the experience that Ron Joseph narrates from Tangier. While sitting in synagogue one Shabbat after the afternoon prayer service waiting for sundown and the evening prayer service to begin, he heard one man ask another, “Have you heard it yet?” It was a question about the hour and if it were time to start the evening service. He thought the questions referred perhaps to a clock chiming. Not long afterwards he heard the muezzin calling across the streets of the city for the beginning of the Muslim evening prayer. The synagogue goers ended their conversations, moved back to their seats, picked up prayer books, and began the evening service. The call of the muezzin for evening prayer advised the Jewish worshipper that night had arrived.

In Morocco, Muslims have cooked Jewish foods and cared for synagogues and cemeteries while Jews have added richness to the cultural and spiritual life of this nation for more than two thousand years. Jews and Muslims have lived together, sometimes with strife but also with respect.”

Discussion Questions:

1. The story mentions coexistence between Muslims and Jews in Morocco. How critical do you think coexistence is for finding *shalom bayit* (Hebrew for peace at home)?
2. How do you see coexistence and *shalom bayit* show up in your own life?
3. How does the ritual of Seder contribute to your sense of *shalom bayit*?
4. How does global Jewish responsibility further the value of helping all Jews find *shalom bayit*?