

**Centropa Lesson**  
**Roots in Spain, Trees in Sarajevo:**  
**The Sephardic Jews of the Balkans**

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**Type of School:** Jewish Day School, United States

**Course:** Modern Jewish History

**Lesson Category:** Jewish history

**Grade level:** 11<sup>th</sup> grade

**Academic level:** Honors

**Academic time needed:** 2-3 one-hour class sessions

**Summary:**

This lesson plan aims to enlighten students about Sephardic history in the Balkans. The Jews expelled from Spain who settled in the Balkans were welcomed, and Jews were generally accepted as part of society, as they were in all parts of the Ottoman Empire. Focusing on Sarajevo as an example of Jewish life in the Balkans, this lesson uses music, a lecture with PowerPoint, photographs and two short films to explore how in times of crisis the positive relationships between Sephardic Jews and their neighbors stood them in good stead.

**Background Lesson Information**

1. Context for Lesson: This lesson was taught in an 11<sup>th</sup> grade Honors Modern Jewish History course that examines how Jews and Judaism changed and modernized from the close of the Middle Ages until modern times. Students examine the struggles of early modern and modern Jews to square modernity and Judaism.
2. Enduring Understandings:
  - a. Sephardic Jewish communities in the Balkans simultaneously integrated into society and remained committed to Jewish tradition and heritage.
  - b. Contemporary American Jews can use their experience as a model for retaining powerful and enduring Jewish identities even while embracing American culture.
3. Goals/Objectives:
  - a. Knowledge acquired:
    - i. how Sephardic Jews came to the Ottoman Empire
    - ii. the way the societies in the Balkans in particular interacted with Sephardic Jews
    - iii. how Sephardic Jews maintained their culture and traditions
    - iv. how the combination of the above three shaped the Sephardic community in the Baltic states into modern times.
  - b. Skills:
    - i. Tracing cultural and ideological themes through history
    - ii. Critical thinking
    - iii. Using audio and visual primary sources to understand history
  - c. Behavior:

- i. By highlighting Sephardic Jews, I hope that students will take note of news about Sephardic Jews and culture that continue to exist in America and in Israel.
    - d. Feelings:
      - i. Students should feel
        - 1. an affinity for Sephardic culture and history.
        - 2. proud of the Sephardic Jews of the Balkans.
        - 3. saddened by the impact of the loss of the Balkan Jewish communities as a result of the Holocaust and Yugoslav wars.
- 4. Resources Needed:
  - a. Centropa Resources:
    - i. “Survival in Sarajevo: Friendship in a Time of War” - Film and accompanying Study Guide  
<http://centropastudent.org/?typ=sprache&fLang=ENG&movID=44&nID=78&q=m>
    - ii. Photos of Sarajevo Haggadah from Centropa Summer Academy (included in PowerPoint)
    - iii. If time permits, Nightline segment by Ed Serotta: “Searching for Hope: Sarajevo Haggadah” (22 minutes) A DVD copy of this segment is available for \$14.95 at [http://www.amazon.com/ABC-News-Nightline-Searching-Hope/dp/B001PR0214/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?s=movies-tv&ie=UTF8&qid=1324197408&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/ABC-News-Nightline-Searching-Hope/dp/B001PR0214/ref=sr_1_1?s=movies-tv&ie=UTF8&qid=1324197408&sr=1-1)
  - b. Non-Centropa Resources
    - i. Background reading: Depending on the level of the students, the teacher can assign:
      - 1. Shorter and more simple: “Jews in the Ottoman Empire” by Eli Barnavi [http://www.myjewishlearning.com/history/Ancient\\_and\\_Medieval\\_History/632-1650/Islamic\\_World/Ottoman\\_Empire.shtml](http://www.myjewishlearning.com/history/Ancient_and_Medieval_History/632-1650/Islamic_World/Ottoman_Empire.shtml)
      - 2. Longer and more difficult: The Jews: A History (Efron et al, editors), pp 183-189. (This is a college-level textbook, but I have found it to be accessible to honors students in 11<sup>th</sup> grade.)
    - ii. Audio clip about Ladino <http://www.prx.org/pieces/55868-like-hanukah-oil-endangered-ladino-language-endur#description>
    - iii. Ladino song “Pesach ala Mano”  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vh3JU9NpI\\_0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vh3JU9NpI_0)
    - iv. Map of Sephardic Migration (in PowerPoint)
- 5. Background Skills/Knowledge:
  - a. Students should have already studied:
    - i. the place of Jews in the Islamic Empire in medieval times, including the “Pact of Umar;”

- ii. the Spanish Inquisition
- b. Students should have completed background reading about the Sephardic Diaspora in the Ottoman Empire

### The Lesson

1. **Pedagogy:** This lesson uses the following different pedagogical techniques:
  - a. Using music, art and film to access the topic.
  - b. Discussion in which students will be encouraged to think critically and engage creatively.
  - c. Lecture (interactive).
2. **Opening Hook:** **As students enter the room, have Flory Jagoda’s song “Pesach a la Mano” playing.** (Here it is on youtube: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vh3JU9NpI\\_0](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vh3JU9NpI_0)). Have PowerPoint slide with lyrics up on screen. If no projector is available, hand out the lyrics on paper to each student. (Appendix A) **After song ends, ask students to tell you about the song:**
  - a. What is the song about?
  - b. What language(s) is it in?
  - c. What can they tell about the melody?
  - d. Has anyone heard the song before?

*Teaching points about Ladino in particular and Jewish “mixed” languages in general:*

- **This is an old traditional Sephardic song.**
- They will have noticed that it is in **Hebrew and Spanish**. Tell them (or remind them) that this combination of Hebrew and Spanish is a Jewish language called Ladino. (Note that background reading in The Jews discusses Ladino and even discusses Ladino songs that incorporate Turkish musical elements. If your students did this reading, you can draw upon their knowledge of the subject.)
- **Ask: What other language does this remind you of?** They will say Yiddish, because it is a combination of Hebrew and German.
- **Ask: Why do you think Jews created these languages?** Discuss how they exemplify the tension between integration and particularism.
- **Ask: What musical influences do they hear in this song?** (Note – my students thought it sounded like Klezmer! They were not familiar with Turkish music and could not identify it.) We will come back to this in a moment.
- Tell them that **even as Jews left the original country in which these languages were born, they continued to speak them.** Yiddish was spoken in Poland for hundreds of years even though German was not the language in Poland. Ladino was spoken in the Ottoman Empire for hundreds of years even though Spanish was not the language there. **WHY?** Ask students for their ideas. Chart ideas on the board as students say them.
- **Play audio clip about Ladino:** (4.5 minutes)  
<http://www.prx.org/pieces/55868-like-hanukah-oil-endangered-ladino-language-endur#description>
  - **Ask students to note the following as they listen:**
    - Fact that word for God in Ladino is “Dio” instead of the plural-sounding actual Spanish word “Dios.”
    - Fact that it did not remain purely Judeo-Spanish. Other words came in – Turkish, Arabic. Also remind students here that the melody for the

Ladino song we heard was Turkish, so external culture came into Jewish culture in other ways as well.

- Note that professor's mother didn't want her daughter to learn it. Note daughter's response: "I want it. It's beautiful. It's mine."

- **Now ask question again. Why did Ladino persist even as the Jews no longer lived in Spain?**
  - **It became a culture unto itself, a Judeo-Spanish culture that was unique.** Jews had enormous pride in their Jewish roots AND in their Spanish roots. How did we see this in the clip? The word for God – "Dio" – Spanish roots, Jewish ideology. Rich cultural history embedded in it.
  - Point out that **it did not remain "purely" Spanish/Hebrew – took in terms from Turkish, Arabic, etc.** SO, it wasn't totally cut off from the culture around it. Similarly, Yiddish took on Slavic words. Point out that this is emblematic of Jewish behavior throughout history: Jews have always tried to find the right place between separation and integration, between retaining their Jewish religion, culture, and traditions and adopting the culture of the surrounding society.
  - **Ask: Why do you think the professor's mother didn't want her to learn Ladino?** Answer: she wanted to acculturate to America. She saw Ladino as old fashioned and un-American. Now that we appreciate our multi-cultural society in America, this has changed. Note the professor's response to her mother: "I want it. It's beautiful. It's MINE." We can be American and still appreciate our unique heritage.

3. Body of Lesson – Tell students that now that we've discussed the language of the Sephardic Jews, **we are now going to talk about where they took that language after leaving Spain.**

- a. **Review with students where Jews went when expelled from Spain:** Portugal, to the Ottoman Empire, and later on to various places in Europe. Show PowerPoint slide with map of Spanish-Jewish migration in the wake of the 1492 expulsion. (Note that the attached PowerPoint has slides about Spanish Inquisition if you want to review with students.)
- b. **WHY did Jews go to the Ottoman Empire?**
  - i. Islamic rule had good associations for the Jews. **Remind students of the Pact of Omar, and Jewish status as "dhimmi" under Muslims**– protected minority. While dhimmi were treated as second class in some ways, they were protected from harm and could practice their religion basically freely. The Ottoman Empire followed the policy of treating Jews as dhimmi, but in reality it was rather relaxed about restrictions. The Empire was more interested in maintaining public order and in collecting tax dollars than in restricting Jews or other minority groups. **Show PowerPoint slide with letter from Rabbi Isaac Zarfati (15<sup>th</sup> century) about life for Jews in Ottoman Empire.**
  - ii. **Tell the story that the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire invited Spanish Jews to settle there.** The story goes that Sultan Bayezid II told his courtiers, "You venture to call Ferdinand a wise ruler, he who has impoverished his own country and

enriched mine!" No document has been found to substantiate this, but the very fact that the myth exists shows that Jews felt welcomed there.

- iii. **Ottoman Empire needed population.** Policy of sürgün: government transferred population into Istanbul because needed more people there. [Discussion point: why is population so important? Need workers, need buyers. Can mention that many European countries today are concerned about their shrinking populations.]
  - iv. **Ottoman Empire did not restrict the Jews economically** – they were permitted to pursue whatever jobs they wanted.
  - v. **Ottoman Empire was a multi-cultural empire and its diversity led to greater acceptance of difference.** [Discussion point: Why is this generally true? Why should diversity lead to greater acceptance of difference? Can contrast to medieval Christian Europe in which the Jews were the only minority and therefore suffered from a great deal of discrimination and exclusion.]
- c. Hallmarks of Ottoman Jewish Life –
- i. Great economic freedom
  - ii. Religious self-rule.
  - iii. Ottoman society was very urban in nature. Gave Jews a cosmopolitan society that was religiously and ethnically diverse: In addition to Muslims, Ottoman society had Christians and Jews. While Muslims were favored, Christians and Jews were protected and encouraged to flourish
  - iv. Jews spoke Ladino – because they were successful in business, some of their trading partners actually learned Ladino to communicate with them! Ultimately, Jews learned Turkish, especially the men, but still spoke Ladino in the Jewish community.
  - v. Jews loved the Ottoman Empire. Show picture of the Ahrida, an Ottoman synagogue in PowerPoint – Dating from early 15<sup>th</sup> century, this is the oldest of Istanbul's 16 synagogues in use today. A remarkable feature of the Ahrida is its Teva (Bima) which is in the shape of the prow of a ship. The tradition says that it symbolizes either Noah's Ark or the Ottoman ships which transported the Sephardim from Spain to Turkey.
  - vi. **Jewish Population Centers in the Ottoman Empire:**
    - 1. Istanbul
    - 2. Salonika
    - 3. Palestine (Safed)
    - 4. North Africa
    - 5. Many smaller communities throughout empire. We will be focusing on one: Sarajevo

***THIS IS A GOOD BREAKING POINT.  
SECOND HALF OF THE LESSON CONTINUES BELOW***

- vii. The Sarajevo Example

(Information taken from resources in the Centropa Study Guide at <http://centropastudent.org/?fLang=ENG&nID=79&movID=44&guideID=37>).

**Show pictures in PowerPoint of synagogue built in 1581 and cemetery from 16<sup>th</sup> century and talk about the following:** Jews were traders, doctors, artisans. By 19<sup>th</sup> century, every single doctor in Sarajevo was Jewish! Tell students that the Jewish community of Bosnia was decimated during the Holocaust – out of 14,000 Jews, 4,000 survived. Briefly explain the Balkan War of the early 1990s. Sarajevo was under siege – longest siege in modern times. Today there are 700 Jews left in Sarajevo. Two important stories to tell:

1. The Sarajevo Haggadah – Share with students the amazing story of the Sarajevo Haggadah, thought to have been written in 1350 and still in existence in the National Museum of Bosnia in Sarajevo today. If time permits, show the Nightline segment made by Ed Serotta, “Searching for Hope: Sarajevo Haggadah” (22 minutes).

**Discussion questions:**

- Why did the Sarajevo Haggadah become such a central symbol to the city of Sarajevo?
- Question: Thinking back on what you learned about the Jews in the Balkans, why do you think the Sarajevo Haggadah, a seemingly solely Jewish symbol, became so important in this multi-ethnic society?
  - Answer: The hundreds of years of multi-ethnic society in the Balkans may have planted the roots that compelled people of different ethnicities and religions to save the Haggadah.
- End with: A replica of the Haggadah is now housed in a place of honor in the National Museum in Sarajevo, the centerpiece of a room dedicated to religious artifacts from all religions of Bosnia. The original is safely locked away. (Pictures in PowerPoint).

2. Show Centropa film “Survival in Sarajevo.” (Note: there is some overlap between the end of the Nightline segment and this film.)

**Discussion Questions:**

- What role did the Jewish community play during the siege of Sarajevo?
- What about Sarajevo’s history may have allowed something like this story to happen?
- Ask: Did you notice the name of the Jewish community organization that devoted itself to helping the citizens of Sarajevo during the war? La Benevolencija! Where does this name come from? Point out that it is a Spanish name – it is Ladino.
- Summarize: like the story of the Sarajevo Haggadah, this story has roots in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. What are they?
  - Sephardic culture and Ladino

- Multi-cultural, tolerant, integrated atmosphere of the Ottoman Empire
- viii. Wrap-up remarks: Review with students what made the Jewish experience in the Balkans unique and how those themes of tolerance and multi-culturalism carried through to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Important: note that however “tolerant” the Balkans, students should not confuse early modern tolerance with what we understand tolerance to be today. Jews were still second-class citizens.
  - Also, important to note that the Holocaust marks a serious exception, when certain groups in Balkan society collaborated with the Nazis.
  - Nonetheless, there is no question that the Ottoman Empire in general and the Balkans in particular was a uniquely safe haven for early modern Jews, and that the qualities of Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire influenced Jewish life after the Empire had fallen.
  - The story of the modern Jewish community of Sarajevo is one of determination and hope.

Concluding Activity: Some possible follow-up activities:

- Students research another Jewish community in the Ottoman Empire, such as Istanbul, Saloniki, Macedonia, etc. They should examine Jewish economic, religious and cultural life in this area in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and then what the community looks like today.
- Ask students to compare and contrast the Jewish experience in early modern Poland and in the early modern Balkans. What common themes can they find regarding the status of these countries as safe harbors for fleeing Jews? What differences can they find?
- Students research another early modern Sephardic Jewish community such as the communities in Amsterdam, England or the United States. What commonalities can they find with the experiences of Jews in the Balkans? (They will see the same sense of Sephardic pride and distinctiveness, trading networks, Ladino.) What differences existed? (They will see that *converso* culture was much stronger outside the Ottoman Empire, particularly in Western Europe.)

## **Reflections**

My students really enjoyed learning about the experience of Jews in the Ottoman Empire and specifically the history of the Jews of Sarajevo. This information was quite new to them, and they found it fascinating. One previously very quiet girl in the class shared her family's Sephardic heritage with us and ended up bringing in postcards in Ladino written by her great-grandparents during World War II. I definitely think that the students connected to the material as much as they did because of my ability to share with them what it was like to travel to Sarajevo. I was able to show them pictures that I took myself or that I was in.

Prior to this lesson students had learned about expulsions from Western Europe and immigration into Poland, so on the next test I asked the students to compare and contrast the Jewish experience in Poland and in the Ottoman Empire. They did this very successfully, and were able to articulate the similarities as well as nuanced differences between the communities.

I think that including the Sephardic experience in our day school Jewish history curricula must be placed at the top of the priority list. We are not effectively educating our students nor are we accurately reflecting the Jewish experience if we leave this out.



## PESACH A LA MANO

Purím, Purím lanu Pesach, Pesach a la mano.	Purím, Purím has gone Pesach, Pesach is almost here.
Las masas sí stan cociendo, los yaprakís sí stan faciéndolo.	The matzot are baking the meat rolls are being made
aman aman aman aman aman el Dío benedícho mos da mazal.	Aman aman aman aman Blessed G-d gíve us good fortune
Purím, purím...	Purím, Purím...
La nona stà díciendo a los níetos: alimpía el polvo cantones y los techos	The grandma tells her grandchildren: clean the dust from the corners and the roofs
Aman aman aman aman aman el Dío benedícho mos da mazal	Aman, aman, aman Blessed G-D gíve us good fortune
El señor rubu díjo a las tíyas no comer el pan ocho días	The Rabbi told the aunts not to eat bread for eight days
Aman aman aman aman aman el Dío benedícho mos da mazal	Aman aman aman aman Blessed G-d , gíve us good fortune

Lyrics and Translation from <http://archive.chazzanut.com/jewish-music/msg19176.html>