



The Golden Age of Spanish Jewry 900-1200 CE

Lesson prepared by:
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Grade Level: Grade 6

Date of lesson: November 9, 2003

Teacher: Suzanne Sobczak

Topic: The Golden Age of Spanish Jewry 900-1200 CE

Enduring Understanding(s) on which this lesson will focus (taken from curriculum):

1. JEWISH STORIES AND HEROES TEACH US ABOUT HOW OTHERS USE THE SPARK OF THE DIVINE IN OURSELVES AND IN OTHERS.
2. HISTORICAL JEWISH COMMUNITIES WORKED TO KEEP JUDAISM ALIVE.
3. JEWISH COMMUNITIES OF THE PAST HAVE MADE CHOICES ABOUT HOW THEY LIVED JEWISHLY.
4. WE ARE CONNECTED TO JEWS ALL OVER THE WORLD

Essential Question(s) that will lead to this understanding (also taken from curriculum):

1. WHO WERE THE PERSONALITIES IN JEWISH HISTORY WHO IMPACTED JEWISH LIFE AND WHAT WERE THEIR STORIES?
2. HOW HAVE THE IMPORTANT MEMBERS OF JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN THE PAST TAKE A GIFT THEY POSSESS AND USED IT TO BENEFIT JEWISH LIFE?



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3. WHAT INFORMED CHOICES DID THE JEWISH COMMUNITIES OF THE PAST CHOOSE TO LIVE JEWISH LIVES?
4. HOW HAS LEARNING KEPT JUDAISM ALIVE THROUGHOUT HISTORY?
5. HOW DID JEWISH COMMUNITIES DEVELOP ALL OVER THE WORLD AND HOW ARE THEY CONNECTED TO JEWISH COMMUNITIES TODAY?

Evidence of Understanding (How will you assess that students have “gotten” the understanding?)

Students will show evidence of understanding through our in class discussions of the essential questions. As well as through their final class presentations on their chosen personality from the time period between 900-1200 CE.

New Vocabulary/Terms (That students will be able to identify by the end of the lesson.)

Sephardic, Sephardim, Chronometers, Piyutim, Kavanot, Hamsa



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Side One

ACTIVITY PLAN

Set Induction (How will you get the students' attention or hook them into the learning)

1. On the blackboard will be written the Sephardic. Students will be encouraged to engage in a discussion on the meaning of this word. Once a definition is agreed upon we will identify what are considered the cultural parts of a community. (art, music, food, festivals...) At this time they will come to find out that we will engage in three cultural activities: Cooking, Art, & Scholarship.
2. We will begin by cooking in the kitchen our peppery (small amount of red peppers) cheese biscuits.
3. During the biscuit making segment an assistant or parent volunteer should set up the classroom space for the art project.
4. When we return from the cooking project the students will be asked if they can identify what a hamsa is? They will learn its meaning and then proceed to create their own hamsa.
5. When our art project is complete the biscuits should be done. We will break, briefly, for a taste.



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6. While eating their biscuits the students will be divided into groups of three to four student study groups where they will read their given text and decide which personality they will present and how.

Learning Experiences (How will you facilitate the students' learning?) Keep in mind:

- organization
- set up
- supplies
- the time each activity will take
- different learning styles
- different levels of questioning

The following is a class schedule for the above activities within an hour and a half time frame:

- 15 minutes for the activity that discusses and identifies the term Sephardic.
- 15 minutes for the biscuit preparation.
- 20 minutes to create Hamsa and learn what the Hamsa represents.
- 40 minutes to read and than create group presentation (and eat biscuits).



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Questions for Discussion (if applicable)

1. *Knowledge*
2. *Comprehension*
3. *Application*
4. *Analysis*
5. *Synthesis*
6. *Evaluation*

Questions will be gleaned from the section on Essential questions.

Conclusion (How will you check for the evidence of understanding)

By the end of our class students will have participated in three different types of cultural 'work'. They will have produced a Sephardic food: peppery cheese biscuits, a Sephardic art piece: a Hamsa to hang in their homes that will contain the definition on the back, and they will have read from prepared booklets on 6 personalities of this time period. Finally towards the closing of the class the groups will share their personality in a group presentation of their choice. (Speech, song, poem, dance.) At the closing of class students will be asked to identify at least one thing they have learned about this period of time of how the Spanish Jews existed, thrived, and prospered.



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Supplies:

(If you need supplies that are not already in your classroom, please copy the needed items onto the supply request form.)

- Materials for cooking project based on recipe
- Materials list from art project: tag board, art paper, oval shaped jewels, glue...
- Prepared booklet that highlights 6 personalities from this time period.



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Side Two

Example of a Parent Letter

Shalom,

Only if man knows himself, and has no illusion about himself, and understands every existing thing in relation to itself, will he find real peace [of mind]. -- Moses Maimonides

Maimonides was just one of the influential thinkers of the period of time that was referred to as 'The Golden Age of Spanish Jewry' (900-1200 CE). Today we learned all about this period of time when the Sephardic community prospered. Sephardic literally means Spanish Jew. We learned through a variety of mediums. We cooked up a Sephardic version of biscuits called 'Boyikos de Keso' (peppery cheese biscuits). We created and decorated our own Hamsa. A Hamsa or Hamesh refers to the five fingers or hand of G-D. It is a type of ancient good luck charm or protective amulet that is worn around your neck or hung in your home. We also were engaged in scholarly learning as we reviewed small booklets that highlighted six Jewish personalities. These were: Hasdai ibn Shaprut (915-975) an advisor and physician to the court, Chanoch ben Moses (10th century) a scholar, Samuel ibn Nagrela (993-1056) an architect and poet, Solomon ibn Gabirol (1021-1055) a poet and philosopher, Y'hudah HaLevi (1070-1141) a poet, physician, philosopher, & religious Jew, Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) physician, rabbi, & advisor, and Benjamin of Tudela (12th century) a traveler who recorded in a travel diary the life and times of the Jewish community.

B'Shalom,



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Ways to further this discussion:

Ask questions that encourage your child to share information on the above Jewish personalities. If information has been lost from our class discussion than research together, as a family, the names of these influential people on the Internet or at the library. Two book sources that I used were: The Jew in the Medieval World, A Source Book: 315-1791, Jacob Rader Marcus, and The Itinerary of Benjamin of Tudela, Travels in the Middle Ages, introduction by Michael A Signer, 1983.



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The Projects

The following activities can be used to enhance the cultural experience of the learning environment. It will give students the feel of the Sephardic lifestyle. It is a balanced accompaniment to the more 'scholarly' part of the lesson. As the facilitator you can either begin with the following cooking and art activity or end with them. The choice is yours to decide:

Cooking

Boyikos de Keso (Peppery Cheese Biscuits)

The boyo is derived from the Spanish bolo, or 'cake'. This recipe is particularly interesting because the biscuits are spicy and rich with cheese. These festive pastries are traditionally served at Shavuot and Tish B'Av.

(Makes about 20 biscuits)

Ingredients:

- ❑ 2 ½ cups flour, or as needed
- ❑ 2 ¼ tsp salt
- ❑ ½ to ¾ tsp. red pepper flakes
- ❑ 1 cup sharp cheddar (or Kasseri)
- ❑ ¾ cup sunflower or canola oil
- ❑ ¼ cup water
- ❑ 1 egg yolk, lightly beaten



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Directions:

- ❑ Preheat the oven to 350 degrees F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper.
- ❑ In a bowl, combine all the dry ingredients with the cheese.
- ❑ Alternate between the oil and water until all is added.
- ❑ Stir until the dough comes together.
- ❑ Shape the dough into 20 balls and press to flatten slightly.
- ❑ Brush tops with the egg yolk and, if desired, sprinkle them lightly with grated cheese.
- ❑ Bake the biscuits until golden, about 25 minutes.
- ❑ Remove from oven and serve warm.

*Recipe from: [Sephardic Flavors: Jewish Cooking of the Mediterranean, Joyce Goldstein, page 61.](#)

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Art

This is a picture of the art project we did as part of our appreciation of the Sephardic Jewish relationship with the Muslim population that ruled Spain at the time of the 'Golden Age of Spanish Jewry'. These are Hamsas a type of 'good luck' amulet that people wore around their necks to ward off 'the evil eye' or 'evil spirits'. They were typically worn by both Jew and Muslim. The name Hamsa is Arabic and means five which refers to the five fingers of a hand. It is likened to the protective hand of G-D. In Hebrew it could be called the Hamesh as in the word for five. We used white tag board that was precut in the shape shown below. (I used by hand as a guide.) The art paper I got from

Hobby Lobby, an art supply store. One amulet uses one piece of art paper traced, cut, and glued with a blue 'eye' shaped gem which is typical of a Hamsa design. They often use an





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eye shape in the center, again to ward of evil. The other Hamsa also uses art paper but utilizes instead of sheet many layers of torn paper in metallic shades. These are just two examples. I'm sure your students will create other designs. Have fun with it. These are about as large as an adult hand and are meant to hang on a wall rather than around your neck. (following these examples is a sheet that can be duplicated, and cut, to place the definition of the Hamsa on the back of their creations.)



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The Booklet

(the following pages can be duplicated and stapled together to form a booklet that can be used for the 'scholarly' activity)



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The Golden Age of Spanish Jewry (900-1200 CE)

It was a wonderful time in Jewish Life, an age of progress, peace, and prosperity. At this time of history Muslims ruled Spain and proved to be a tolerant nation. Both Jews and Muslims shared their creativity and produced works that have lasted through time in the sciences, the arts, and other areas of scholarship.

For example:

Life in Cordova, Spain in the tenth century, under Muslim rule, was pleasant for the Jews. Wealthy Muslims and Jews occupied the countryside. The marketplace had stalls of silks, brocades, leathers, and produce. Vendors also sold silver, metal locks, and chronometers (timekeepers). Jewish merchants were free to travel on business throughout the lands. (Middle East & North Africa) Jews from Cordova specialized in textiles. While the Jews traveled for their trade they also shared news about business with each other and the latest answers from rabbis concerning questions of Jewish practice. Jews had a choice of over twenty synagogues. One of the largest centers for Scholarship was at the University of Cordova. Jews, Christians, and Muslims attended classes together. Many languages were spoken in the halls of this institution. Arabic was the main language of the streets and in the schools. Educated people read Greek and Latin. In addition, educated Jews spoke and wrote in Hebrew. Jews were also involved in translating ancient Greek and Latin books into Arabic



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and Hebrew. At the time there was no printing press and books were handwritten. Owning a collection of books was considered a mark of both education and wealth.

The following list identifies influential Jewish personalities during ‘The Golden Age of Spanish Jewry’:

- Hasdai ibn Shaprut (915-975)
- Chanoch ben Moses (10th century)
- Samuel ibn Nagrela (993-1056) in Hebrew “Shmuel HaNagid”
- Solomon ibn Gabirol (1021-1055)
- Y’hudah HaLevi (1070-1141)
- Moses Maimonides (1135-1204)
- Benjamin of Tudela (lived in the early part of 1100’s)

After reading the biographical statement on each person choose the one that your group agrees would have been an interesting person of this time period. State facts about this person and why you chose him. Address some of these questions: In what ways did your person make a difference in the society? How did this benefit Jewish life? What do you think was your person’s spark of the divine? What sacrifices or choices did your person make? Why? How did your person keep Judaism alive?



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Your group can choose to present in any format. I.e.: a speech, a play, a song, a poem, a dance...

Hasdai ibn Shaprut (915-975)

Hasdai rose to be the trusted advisor and the court physician to the Muslim ruler, Abdar-Rahman III. At the end of wars, Hasdai negotiated peace and wrote the peace treaties. Hasdai set about making Cordova into a major center of Jewish learning. He brought scholars and teachers from other areas and established an academy of higher Jewish studies.

Chanoch ben Moses (10th century)

Chanoch ben Moses was a scholarly Babylonian Jew who became the head of the yeshiva. He came to Cordova University at the request of Hasdai ibn Shaprut. Rabbi Chanoch was so well respected for his teachings that when Jews had a question about Jewish law they would send someone to ask him. Now that he was in Cordova they no longer had to wait long months for answers from the schools in Babylonia. Spain now had become a center for Jewish scholarship.



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Samuel ibn Nagrela (993-1056)

One of the most magnificent palaces ever built is in the city of Granada, Spain. It is called the Alhambra. It is said to have been built by Samuel ibn Nagrela, or as he is known in Hebrew, Shmuel HaNagid (Samuel the Prince). Some scholars say that he built the Alhambra for the caliph, the Muslim ruler, but others say that he built it for himself and his family. The palace, which still stands in Granada, has hundreds of rooms.

During his life, he was a vizier, or assistant to King Ibn Abbas and later to the king's son. Samuel served the king as both a tax collector and a military commander. He led a Muslim army force for seventeen years.

In addition, Samuel was one of the leading poets of the golden age. He was also a patron for other poets, helping them as they struggled to be recognized.



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Here is one of Samuel poems:

From "The Battle of Alfuenta"

by: Samuel ibn Nagrela 1038

It was a day of darkness and thick fog.

The sun was as black as my heart.

The tumult was like that of a cloudburst, like the roar of breakers when the sea is swept by a storm.

When the sun came out, the earth rocked on its pillars as if it were drunk.

The horses lunged back and forth like vipers darting out of their nest.

The hurled spears were like bolts of lightning, filling the air with light.

Arrows pelted us like raindrops, as if our shields were sieves.

Their strung bows were like serpents, each serpent spewing forth a stinging bee.

Their swords above their heads were like glowing torches, which darken as they fall.



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Solomon ibn Gabirol (1021-1055)

Solomon was both a poet and a philosopher. He wrote a major book of philosophy under a pseudonym, calling himself by the Latin name Avicbron. His book Fons Vitae was a Latin translation of a book he wrote in Hebrew called Mekor Hayim (The Fountain of Life). The ideas presented in it were so new and so well thought-out that the book had a great impact on philosophical thoughts. Because it did not specifically mention Judaism, the Christian scholars had no idea that the writer was a pious Jew. The author's identity was not revealed until 800 years later, in the nineteenth century.

From "Earth's Embroidery"

by Solomon ibn Gabirol

With the ink of its showers and rains,
With the quill of its lightning, with the
Hand of its clouds, winter wrote a letter
Upon the garden, in purple and blue.
No artist could ever conceive the like of
That. And this is why the earth,
Grown jealous of the sky,
Embroidered stars in
The folds of the flower beds.



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Solomon ibn Gabirol also wrote many religious poems known as *piyutim*. These poems, meant as short introductions to prayers, are sometimes called *kavanot*. *Kavanot* refers to intention, to ready oneself to pray with intention. Many of his poems have made their way into the Shabbat and holiday prayer books we still use today.

Here is one example:

Morning and evening I seek You,
Spreading out my hand, lifting up my
Face in prayer...Therefore
I shall praise the name of the Lord
As long as the breath of the living God is
In my nostrils.

Y'hudah HaLevi (1070-1141)

Y'hudah HaLevi is one of the best known Jewish poets of the golden age. In addition to writing poetry, he was an honored physician, a philosopher, and a learned religious Jew. His most popular book was called Sefer HaKuzari, or The Book of the Kuzari. In Sefer HaKuzari the Jewish teacher of the Khazars says that one of the important mitzvot of Judaism is to travel to Israel. More than



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anything, Y'hudah loved Israel. Toward the end of his life he set out on a journey, hoping to reach the Holy Land. It is known that he made it at least as far as Egypt.

From “My Heart Is in the East”

by Y'hudah HaLevi

My heart is in the East and I am in the depths of the West.

My food has no taste. How can it be sweet?

How can I fulfill my pledges and my vows,

When Zion is in the power of Edom, and I am in the fetters of Arabia?

It will be nothing for me to leave all the goodness of Spain.

So rich will it be to see the dust of the ruined sanctuary.

Y'hudah HaLevi also wrote piyutim or kavanot:

Lord, where shall I find You?

Your place is lofty and secret.

And where shall I not find You?

The whole earth is full of Your glory!



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Moses Maimonides (1135-1204)

Maimonides was considered an outstanding physician by Jews as well as by Muslims. Many of his medical ideas were quite advanced for his time. Besides caring for sick people, he was interested in preventive medicine, which was a brand-new idea. He tried to make people understand the importance of taking care of one's body before sickness strikes.

Maimonides wrote many important medical papers that were studied by people in Europe and North Africa. His subjects included the causes of asthma, the importance of proper hygiene, and the mechanics of blood circulation. He identified and organized lists of different symptoms of poisoning, including varieties of snakebites. He even advised that the antidotes should be easily available in apothecaries, an early form of the modern pharmacy. His classification of the various symptoms of poisoning was so thorough and so important that it is still a reference for doctors today.

For Maimonides, a correct diet and a positive mental outlook were important parts of being healthy. He prescribed keeping the body and the home clean, and he included exercise and breathing techniques as part of his program to help a sick person regain health. His religious beliefs were closely connected to his scientific knowledge, and one drew from the other. He thought that prayer and religious study contributed to a person's emotional well-being, and that this would bring about greater physical health.



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When Maimonides died both Jews and Muslims publicly mourned him. He was buried in the Land of Israel, in the city of Tiberias. On his tombstone there is an inscription that reads, “From Moshe to Moshe no one arose like Moshe.” In other words, not since the time of Moses had such a leader arisen until Moses Maimonides.

Benjamin of Tudela (12th century)

In the 1160's, when Benjamin of Tudela made his journey through different Jewish communities, the only forms of transportation were horses, camels, donkeys, and sailing ships. Jews traveled frequently for business and trade purposes, but what makes Benjamin different was that he kept notes and wrote them up as a travel diary.

Because the distances were so great, Benjamin spent many months in each of the places that he visited. While there, he kept detailed notes about the buildings of the town or city, the distances between places, the size and wealth of the Jewish community, the occupations of the people, the schools, the names of the important leaders, and some of the customs of each place. His diary gives us a description of Jewish communities in the twelfth century.



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Benjamin traveled through Rome and on to Greece and Constantinople. From there, he describes the Jewish communities of the Near East. Among the places he visited were Antioch, Damascus, Baghdad, Palestine, India, and Egypt, before returning home to Spain by way of Sicily and Rome.

Resource

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