

LESSON 4: LANGUAGE SPOTLIGHT: JEWISH IRANIAN LANGUAGES

Lesson Overview

Theme/Topic/Big Ideas:

- Diverse places Jews have lived
- Languages Jews have spoken
- Language endangerment

Summary: This lesson takes a closer look at Jewish languages from Iran and how they became endangered.

Essential Question(s)

- Before easy transportation and the internet, why and in what ways did Jews in different cities and towns within the same country speak differently?
- How did Jewish migration patterns impact the expression of Jewish languages?
- To what extent did Jewish communities integrate culturally into the host cultures of the countries to which they moved?

Objective:

In this lesson, students will:

- Become aware of some of the Jewish linguistic diversity of Iran
- Identify ways to help raise awareness about endangered Jewish languages

Time: 45 minutes

Handouts and Visuals Link

Materials and setup

- Judeo-Iranian word cards
- Judeo-Iranian videos and a way to play them
- Turn and talk questions written on the board or on a handout, and paper/pens for taking notes
- Sticky notes and pens

Background Information for Educators:

<https://www.jewishlanguages.org/judeo-iranian>

Introduction/Set Induction: Card Game! (10 min)

[Handout Link](#)

- Break the students into teams of 3–4
- Distribute to each group:
 - map with cities in Iran where Jews lived for many centuries (until recently):
 - cards with the word that Jews used for “dog” in each of those cities:

Instructions:

- These cards have the word for “dog” in seven different Jewish Iranian languages: Judeo-Shirazi, Judeo-Yazdi, Judeo-Isfahani, etc.
- First challenge: In 1 minute (set timer), group these words by what they have in common: create as many piles of similar words as you need. Return to the full group and discuss:
- How many piles do you have? (Likely three or four.)
- Jewish languages include many words from Hebrew. The Judeo-Shirazi word *keleb* is influenced by the Hebrew word for dog, *kelev*.
- Second challenge: In 3 minutes (set timer), write the words on the map near the location where Jews used them. (Their map should look like [this](#) once completed)

Return to full group and discuss:

- What do you notice about the map?
- Did Jews in nearby cities say “dog” in similar ways?
 - Sometimes. Hamadan and Borujerd are near each other (91 miles – a few days’ journey by horse or camel), and they have similar words: *kuye* and *kuya*. Same with Yazd and Kerman: *esbo* and *espo*. But Kashan and Isfahan are also pretty close (129 miles), and they have totally different words: *esbe* and *kudhe*.
- This exercise is about just one word, but it shows how Jews throughout Iran spoke different languages — our focus for today.

Introduction/Set Induction: Card Game! (10 min)

- Most Jews who came to the US from Iran speak Persian, also known as Farsi, the language of the capital, Tehran. But before the mid-20th century, Jews in Iran spoke different languages. These languages were related to Persian but so different that someone who spoke Persian couldn't understand someone who spoke Judeo-Isfahani, Judeo-Yazdi, etc.
- What do you think it would have been like for speakers of two different languages to try to communicate?
- Why do you think people in different cities in the same country spoke so differently?
- This was also the case in America before colonizers imposed English on Native American tribes. It was also the case in most countries for most of history. During the 18th to 20th centuries, governments in some countries required schools to be conducted in the standard national language as a way of unifying the country. Examples include Italy, Germany, Israel, the United States, and Iran.
- This had some positive effects, like people being able to understand each other without learning a new language. But it also had negative effects: making people who don't speak the standard language seem uneducated and leading to many languages becoming endangered and eventually disappearing.

EXPLORE: Judeo-Iranian Languages (10 min)

Let's learn more about Iranian Jewish languages. Watch the following video, featuring Judeo-Isfahani, Judeo-Hamedani, Judeo-Kashani, Judeo-Yazdi, and other Judeo-Median languages of Iran. As you watch, jot down notes about the following: one new thing you learned about Jews of Iran, one question you have, and one idea you have about documenting/preserving these languages. (Teachers may want to pause the video periodically to ask questions and prompt student reflection.)

Judeo-Isfahani, Judeo-Hamedani, Judeo-Kashani, Judeo-Yazdi, and other Judeo-Median Languages of Iran

EXPLORE: Judeo-Iranian Languages (10 min)

Turn and Talk: Video Takeaways

- Turn to a partner and discuss: one new thing you learned, one question you have, one idea you have about documenting/preserving these languages.
- Each pair shares one thought with the full group.

CREATE: PR Campaign (15 min)

We learned from the videos we watched that Iranian-Jewish languages are endangered. What are some things you might do to bring awareness to these languages?

Identify one creative way you can teach someone else about these languages. Use class time to develop your PR campaign: write a song, create a poster, make a TikTok video, use some new vocabulary, or find another creative way to introduce your friends and family to a new language.

For more information:

This article discusses the history of Iranian Jewish languages and efforts to preserve them today.

Share with students as appropriate.

<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/community/articles/endangered-jewish-languages>

Reflection/Conclusion: Sticky note “What sticks with you?” (5 min)

On two sticky notes, have each student write down:

- One thing that surprised you today.
- One thing your class, school, or synagogue community can do to help bring more awareness to Judeo-Iranian languages.

Optional Extension: Further Reading (5-10 min or as homework)

To learn more about speakers of Judeo-Iranian languages today and efforts to preserve the language, have students read this article in the Forward.

<https://forward.com/culture/554932/jewish-languages-iran-neo-aramaic-endangered-preservation-wikimedia/>

Optional Extension: Language Guests

Is there someone in your classroom or school community who speaks an Iranian Jewish language? Invite them in to share some vocabulary or for a Q and A session.

Optional Extension: Holiday Words

Teaching this lesson around a holiday time? Introduce Iranian Jewish words into your holiday-related lesson content.

See <https://www.jewishlanguages.org/judeo-iranian> to learn holiday names like ilanot, the name for Tu Bishvat, moed-e gol, for Shavuot, or the Jewish Language Project's holiday exhibit pages for more holiday-specific vocabulary <https://www.jewishlanguages.org/samples>