Mizrahi Heritage Month is celebrated in November to honor the history, culture, and contributions of Mizrahi Jews, who are from the Middle East and North Africa.

The month also commemorates the displacement of approximately 850,000 Jewish refugees from Arab countries and Iran after 1948, with November 30th designated as an official day of commemoration.

While Ashkenazi and Sephardic narratives often dominate Jewish history, the Mizrahi story is an equally vital thread in the Jewish tapestry — rich in culture, resilience, and faith.

In celebrating Mizrahi Heritage Month, we honor not just the survival of these communities, but their enduring vitality. Their story is not a footnote to Jewish history; it is one of its main chapters, written in the languages, melodies, and memories of the East.

Here are 10 things you might not know about Mizrahi Jews:

1) 'Mizrahi' means 'Eastern' — but it's a modern term.

The word *Mizrahi* comes from the Hebrew *mizrach* (מִזְרָח), meaning "east." Yet, it's a relatively recent umbrella term used to describe Jews from the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Central Asia — such as Iraq, Yemen, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Iran, and beyond. Historically, these communities identified more with their specific countries or cities rather than as part of a single "Mizrahi" category.

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2) The oldest diaspora communities were Mizrahi.

Before there were European Jewish communities, there were Jewish communities in Babylon, Persia, and Yemen. Jews have lived continuously

throughout the Middle East for over 2,600 years — long before the rise of Islam or Christianity. The Babylonian Talmud, one of Judaism's foundational texts, was compiled in modern-day Iraq.

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3) They are the majority of Israel's Jews.

After the modern State of Israel's founding in 1948, more than half of the new immigrants came from Arab and Muslim countries. Within just a few years, Mizrahi Jews made up the majority of Israel's Jewish population.

Between 1948 and the early 1970s, roughly 850,000 Jews fled or were expelled from Arab countries and Iran. Their homes were confiscated, their citizenship revoked, and their histories often erased. Yet, this mass displacement — comparable in scale to Palestinian refugees — remains one of the least-discussed episodes of the 20th century.

Since 2014, the Day to Mark the Departure and Expulsion of Jews from the Arab Countries and Iran is a National Day of Commemoration in Israel, observed every year on November 30th to memorialize the Jewish exodus from the Muslim world.

November 30th was chosen due to its symbolic proximity to the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine, adopted on November 29, 1947, after which many Mizrahi Jews in Middle Eastern and North African countries started to experience pressure and hostility from their Arab and Persian neighbors that ultimately resulted in a large scale exodus of Jewish communities from these countries.

In 2021, the first physical memorial for the Day to Mark the Departure and Expulsion of Jews from the Arab Countries and Iran was placed on the Sherover Promenade in Jerusalem. The sculpture is the interpretive work of Sam Philipe, a fifth-generation Jerusalemite.

4) Baghdad was once 40-percent Jewish.

In the early 20th century, Baghdad's Jewish community was thriving. Its members were merchants, bankers, musicians, and scholars who spoke Arabic and contributed to Iraq's modernization. By 1948, there were around 135,000 Jews in Iraq. Today, fewer than five remain.



Children in a Jewish school in Baghdad in 1959 (photo: Maurice Shohet/Wikipedia)

In early 20th-century India, Hindu and Muslim women were often forbidden by social norms from acting in films. This opened the door for Jewish women from the Bene Israel and Baghdadi Jewish communities to become some of

India’s first film stars. Actresses like Ruby Myers (known as Sulochana), Esther Victoria Abraham (Pramila), and Nadira became household names, pioneering female representation in Indian cinema long before it was socially acceptable for most Indian women to do so.

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5) Their musical traditions shaped Israeli culture.

From the haunting *piyyutim* (liturgical songs) of Moroccan synagogues to the lively rhythms of Iraqi and Yemeni melodies, Mizrahi music transformed Israel’s soundscape. Artists like Zohar Argov and Ofra Haza brought *Mizrahi pop* to the mainstream, reshaping Israeli identity through the fusion of East and West.

Mizrahi music blends Jewish liturgy with the sounds of the Middle East — Arabic melodies, Persian rhythms, and Hebrew poetry. It carries the heartbeat of Jewish life from Yemen, Iraq, Morocco, Egypt, Iran, and beyond.

For decades after Israel’s founding, it was dismissed by the Ashkenazi establishment as “low culture,” excluded from state radio and festivals. But starting in the 1980s, artists like Zohar Argov, Boaz Sharabi, and others brought Mizrahi music into the national spotlight. Ofra Haza, the daughter of Yemenite immigrants, became an international icon by fusing ancient Yemenite chants with modern pop and electronic sounds; her hit *Im Nin’alu* introduced Mizrahi music to the world.

Today, Mizrahi music is not only a dominant force in Israeli pop culture; it’s a unifying sound that bridges the country’s diverse communities and connects Israel to its Middle Eastern roots.

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6) They preserved ancient Jewish languages.

While many Ashkenazi Jews spoke Yiddish, Mizrahi Jews preserved languages like Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Tat, and Judeo-Aramaic — each blending Hebrew with local tongues. Some of these languages still survive among older generations or in liturgical contexts.

After Mizrahi Jews moved to the State Israel, they brought with them not just different cuisines and customs, but different sounds. Many Mizrahi Jews pronounced Hebrew in ways closer to its ancient, semitic roots — emphasizing guttural letters like *chet* (ח) and *ayin* (ע) that Ashkenazi Hebrew had softened or lost.

You can often hear the difference in everyday speech, songs, and prayers: The throaty richness of Mizrahi pronunciation connects modern Hebrew more closely to its biblical and Middle Eastern origins. Some linguists even argue that the Hebrew you hear in Mizrahi communities today may be more historically authentic than the standardized Israeli accent that emerged in the mid-20th century.

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7) Their cuisine is the soul of Israeli food.

When you eat hummus, shakshuka, or sabich, you're tasting Mizrahi history. These dishes — rooted in Iraqi, Yemeni, Moroccan, and Tunisian kitchens — became Israeli staples. Mizrahi cuisine, characterized by warm spices, slow-cooked stews, and communal dining, has become a defining feature of Israeli hospitality.

In fact, there's a running joke in Israel that if you want bland food, eat Ashkenazi; if you want good food, eat Mizrahi. But behind the humor lies a truth: Mizrahi cooking gave Israel its spice, literally and culturally.

Mizrahi cuisine is a feast of colors, aromas, and memories. It blends centuries of Jewish life from Iraq, Yemen, Iran, Morocco, Egypt, and beyond. Every dish tells a story of survival, adaptation, and holiness in everyday life. On Shabbat tables, Iraqi Jews serve *kubbeh* soup with bright red beet broth, Yemenite families bake *jachnun* and *kubaneh* (slow-cooked breads eaten with grated tomatoes and hard-boiled eggs), and Moroccan Jews prepare *dafina*, a rich overnight stew that fills homes with the scent of cumin, cinnamon, and coriander.

When Mizrahi Jews arrived in Israel, their food was initially dismissed as "ethnic" or "home cooking," while Ashkenazi foods like schnitzel and kugel defined the mainstream. But over time, Mizrahi flavors transformed Israeli cuisine. Dishes like *hummus*, *shakshuka*, *chraime* (spicy North African fish), *sabich*, and *malawach* became national staples, celebrated in homes and restaurants across the country.

Today, Mizrahi food is recognized not only for its irresistible taste but for its heritage. It embodies the story of Jewish return: to the land, to flavor, and to pride.

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8) Yemenite Jews are famous for their Torah reading.

Among Mizrahi communities, Yemenite Jews are especially known for their extraordinary precision in reading the Torah. Their pronunciation preserves ancient Hebrew sounds and follows a meticulous system of *ta'amim* (cantillation marks) and *nikud*(vowelization) that has changed little over centuries.

Because of their accuracy and devotion, Yemenite Torah readers are often regarded as living links to biblical Hebrew itself. Their melodies are complex

and mesmerizing; some scholars believe they most closely resemble how the Torah was chanted in the First and Second Temple periods.

Even today, Yemenite Jews are sought after in Israel for Torah readings, ensuring the sacred text is recited with unparalleled fidelity to its ancient form.



A famous photo of Yemenite Jews traveling by foot to Israel in 1949 (photo: Zoltan Kluger/Wikipedia)

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9) For many Mizrahi Jews, Israel was a return, not a response.

For Middle Eastern Jews who came from Arab countries, living in Israel represents not a break from the past, but a continuation of it. In their eyes,

the State of Israel was not born out of the Holocaust — an interpretation more common among Ashkenazi Jews — but from the fulfillment of a 2,000-year-old dream: the return of the Jewish People to our ancestral homeland.

This perspective shapes a unique national consciousness. Many Mizrahi Jews see themselves first and foremost as Jews, and second as Israelis, a hierarchy of identity rooted in faith and history rather than politics. This worldview often informs their approach to regional conflict: Having personally experienced persecution and displacement in Arab lands, many Mizrahi Jews are skeptical of peace processes that rely on trust in regimes or movements that have called for the destruction of the Jewish state.

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10) Mizrahi's preserve the soul of Jewish life.

From Yemenite midwives to Moroccan poets and Iraqi singers, Mizrahi women have long been the heart of their communities. They preserved oral traditions, lullabies, and family rituals through centuries of exile and upheaval. Figures like singer and actress Shoshana Damari, known as the "First Lady of Israeli Song," brought Mizrahi music into Israel's cultural mainstream and gave voice to the soul of the East.

What's more, Mizrahi traditions brought renewed color and depth to Israeli Judaism. The ecstatic melodies of Moroccan *piyyutim*, the mystical teachings of Iraqi rabbis, and the poetic prayers of Yemenite Jews helped restore a sense of joy, song, and community to Israeli religious life.

Today, Mizrahi Jews make up over half of Israel's Jewish population, yet their stories were long underrepresented in textbooks, museums, and collective memory. That is slowly changing. From Mizrahi cultural centers to documentaries and new academic research, a long-overdue reckoning is

unfolding — one that acknowledges the central role of Middle Eastern Jews in shaping modern Jewish life and identity.

To walk through Israel today is to hear the echo of Baghdad in a marketplace, to taste Aleppo in a stew, to see Sana’a in a prayer shawl. The story of Mizrahi Jews is not just one of exile. It is one of return, endurance, and the restoration of a people’s full voice in the Jewish homeland.