

The Roadmap to the Jewish Golden Age of Spain

Overview:

Numerous examples serve to challenge the common view that Jewish history is a series of events marked by tragedy, exile, and separation from the dominant culture. One of these is the period known to Jewish historians as the Golden Age of Spain - roughly the tenth through the twelfth century - when the Iberian Peninsula was under Islamic rule. This was a rich and vital period for the Jewish people, marked by extensive participation in public and economic life and the flourishing of Hebrew culture. While remaining true to their religious traditions, these highly educated and cosmopolitan Jews were also deeply engaged in philosophy, literature, art, and science.

Note to teachers: This lesson focuses on the period from the tenth to the twelfth century, *not* the period from 1500 to 1700, which is often referred to as a "Golden Age" of Spanish literature and poetry.

Goal:

This lesson helps students to discover for themselves, through analysis of media and of primary source historical documents, how Jews achieved high levels of assimilation and acceptance under Islamic rule during the Golden Age of Spain.

Students will engage in research, small-group discussions, whole class discussions, poetry readings, and dramatic performances, among other activities. Assessments include class and small-group participation, individual journal reflections on material viewed or discussed in class, and oral and fine arts presentations.

Objectives:

Students will:

1. be exposed to historical, sociological and cultural information from the period known as the Golden Age of Spain;
2. explore the interplay among language, literature and literacy and the greater culture in which one lives;
3. understand the role of Jews and Jewish culture within the context of the greater Islamic culture of tenth to twelfth century Spain;
4. consider how cultures relate to and influence each other.

Subjects Covered:

World History, Historical Understanding, Language Arts

Suggested Time Frame:

The entire lesson plan can be completed in approximately 6 to 10 45-minute class sessions.

Individual learning activities may break down as follows:

Iberian Peninsula, 732 - 1492: Historical Overview (1 - 2 sessions)

Understanding Judaism Within the Context of Islamic Rule (1 session)
Islamic Civilization and Jewish Partnership (1 - 2 sessions)
Thriving Jewish Culture in Medieval Spain As Explored Through Poetry (1 session)
Culminating Activity: Golden Age Party (2 - 4 sessions)

Learning Activity 1: Iberian Peninsula, 732-1492: Historical Overview

This learning activity is intended to provide students with basic historical, geographical, political, and cultural information regarding the region during this time period.

Introductory Activity:

1. Ask students to characterize, briefly, what they know about Islamic-Jewish relations. Write their answers on the board.
2. Explain to students that they will be learning about a particular historical epoch in the history of Islamic-Jewish relations often referred to as the "Golden Age of Spain." Ask students why we might call a historical period a golden age. What kinds of things might have taken place during such a period?
3. Optional Question (to be used if students have some prior knowledge of the Jewish Golden Age of Spain): Ask the students what they know about the Golden Age of Spain. Write their responses on the board, then restate and categorize the information. Summarize the basic facts about the period students will be studying and encourage them to take notes on the summary.

Note to teachers: The following Web sites and books offer a good historical overview of the period:

University of St. Andrews: The Golden Age of Spain
<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~jewsoc/histspain.html>

The Peace Encyclopedia: The Golden Age of Arab-Jewish Coexistence
<http://www.yahoodi.com/peace/golden.html>

Golden Age of Muslim Spain, Part 1: The 11th Century
http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=74

The Almohads Disrupt the Golden Age of Spain
http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=36

Golden Age of Muslim Spain, Part 2: The Beginnings of Christian Reconquest, 9th - 12th Centuries
http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=127

The Golden Age of Spain Tarnishes, 1250-1391
http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=128

Gerber, Jane S. *Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience*. New York: Free Press, 1992.

Dodds, Jerrilynn Denise, Thomas F. Glick and Vivian B. Mann. *Convivencia: Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*. George Braziller, 1992.

4. Explain to students that in order to understand the rise of the Golden Age of Spain, they need to understand what was happening in the region politically, economically, and religiously in the centuries leading up to the Golden Age. Display the DVD-ROM image Atlas: Europe/Near East/North Africa to the class.

5. Distribute the “Atlas Exploration” handout and ask students to explore the atlas segment of the DVD-ROM in small groups. If you only have one computer, this can be done as a class activity. Ask students to write down five questions and answers based on the information they encounter in Atlas.

- Begin by reading the summary aloud to students while the map is projected. This will provide the necessary historical context for students to understand what was happening in the region at the time. Flip between the modern and historical view, and explore the changes that occurred in earlier periods by clicking and dragging the timeline bar to the left of the map. Notice the changes in empires, trade routes, and borders.
- Next, zoom in on the Iberian Peninsula and read the summary.
- Zoom out, and move on to the next time period (732-1492). Read the summary, flip between the modern and historical view, and click and drag the timeline bar to explore the changes that occurred during this time period.
- Zoom in on the Iberian Peninsula once again, and read the summary for this time period.

6. Divide the class into small groups and ask each group to select a scribe (the person responsible for taking notes) and a reporter (the person responsible for reporting the work of the small group to the class). Instruct students to discuss the questions and answers they've written down. Students, during their discussions, should select five important facts that help to characterize each time period, and the scribe should write these on large paper. Tape these papers on an appropriate wall so that the entire class can see them.

7. Regroup and ask the reporters to share their group's work with the whole class. Encourage students to take notes on the information presented by the small groups.

8. Finally, students should create in their journals a rough timeline of events for these periods. Ideally, they can do this at the end of the lesson, with the small-group lists and the DVD-

ROM as resources. The purpose of this assignment is for students to begin to build a set of resources/references that will help them remember the context of various time periods. Alternately, you may want to have students keep a journal with a "growing timeline" that builds over the course of this lesson.

Learning Activity 2: Understanding Judaism Within the Context of Islamic Rule

In order to begin a discussion about the Jewish Golden Age of Spain, it is necessary to understand the relationship between Judaism and Islam.

Note to teachers: For more information on the rise of Islam and its view of Judaism, refer to Learning Activity 2 of the lesson "Islam and Judaism: From Muhammad to the Ottoman Empire."

1. Distribute copies of the handout "Judaism Within the Context of Islamic Rule." The handout contains questions for your students to think about and discuss as they view the videos in this activity.
2. Play the video segment The Arab Age and ask students to jot down notes on the handout as they watch the video.
 - What was the goal of Muhammad's successors?
 - How did Islam differ from Judaism?
 - Muslims accept the revelations handed down to Jews and Christians by their prophets. How do you imagine this would affect Islam's view and treatment of Jews and Christians?
3. Play the video segment Jews In Muslim Lands. The segment ends when the narrator says, "A chapter to be written on the continent of Europe." Once again, ask students to take notes on the questions on the handout as they watch the video:
 - What factors led to the "new age" for the Jews in Arab lands?
 - How did the international culture of the time affect Jewish life?
 - What were the effects of the Jews' newfound prosperity?

Ask students to share what they've written in response to the questions, and try to synthesize different responses from the group.

4. Show students the video segment Jewish Partnership in its entirety (the segment ends when the narrator says, "... sharing in the first great florescence of culture since the days of the Roman Empire"). Have students share their responses to the questions and ask them if this picture of the Golden Age jibes with their original ideas about what a "golden age" might be.

- How is the Golden Age of Spain described?
- What are some of the words and images used to paint a picture of life during this era?

5. Distribute the handout “Golden Age of Spain Homework Questions.” Ask students to record their responses in their journals and bring the journals to the next class session. Explain to students that by answering these questions, they can begin to understand the changing relationship between Jews and Muslims during the Golden Age of Spain.

- What do you think were the factors that led to the emergence of the Golden Age of Spain for the Jews?
- Consider the relationship between the Jews and Muslims of Spain during the Golden Age. How did this relationship impact life in Spain during this time for the Jews?

Learning Activity 3: Muslim and Jewish Partnership

Review what students have learned during the previous activities. In particular, remind students that the rise of Islam and the impact that Muhammad and Islam had on Judaism in the Arab world were largely responsible for the emergence of the Golden Age for the Jews of Spain. Explain that in this activity, the focus will be on the interrelationship of Islamic and Jewish cultures in Spain.

1. Explain to students that they will now be analyzing historical documents in order to understand specific issues and events of the Golden Age. But in order to fully understand these documents, students must first define some important terms. Distribute copies of the handout “Golden Age of Spain Vocabulary” and ask students to use the CONCISE JUDAICA function of the DVD-ROM to define the following vocabulary words:

- Sepharad (Hebrew word for Spain)
- Sephardim (Jews whose ancestors came from Spain and Portugal)
- Caliph (head of the Arabic dynastic kingdom)
- Caliphate (Arabic dynastic kingdoms)
- Exilarch (lay head of the Babylonian Jewish community, seen as the "head of the exile," or the authority on Judaism for those outside the Land of Israel)
- Dhimmi (protected non-Muslims, i.e., Christians and Jews)

Optimally, students will work in small groups to define these vocabulary words. Note: The explanations in the CONCISE JUDAICA are far more detailed than is indicated above! Students should write their own definitions for these words in their notebooks or journals.

2. Explain to students that they will be analyzing primary source historical documents in order to determine for themselves what the Golden Age of Spain was really like. Divide the class into small groups and ask them to look at the Jewish Partnership documents: "The Exilarch Converses with the Caliph," "Jewish Scholarship in Cordoba," and "An Exilarch is Installed."

Ask students to read each document and answer the questions in the “Jewish Partnership” handout:

Questions for "An Exilarch is Installed:"

- What is significant about this installation?
- Based on the description, how might you imagine the relationship between the exilarch and the Muslim leadership of the land?

Questions for "The Exilarch Converses with the Caliph:"

- Why does the Muslim cleric show respect for the Jewish exilarch?
- Describe or restate the scene. You may even have the students act this out to get a sense of how striking the situation must have been.

Questions for "Jewish Scholarship in Cordoba:"

- What is the significance of Hasdai Ibn Shaprut's importation of Jewish scholarly books to Spain? This document is excerpted from a Muslim history. What does this indicate about the relationship between at least some of the Jews and Muslims of the time?

When students have completed their analysis, initiate a class discussion in which they share their responses with the group as a whole.

Review: These documents are intended to help students understand the power structures that existed for Jews in the Exile. Jewish religious authority was centered in Babylonia, where the Jews' Muslim counterparts held the Jewish leadership in esteem. Due to the efforts of Jewish physician Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, the Jews of Spain were able to acquire and learn from Jewish scholarly books, and no longer had to rely on the religious authority of the Babylonian academies.

3. Once students have discussed their insights into and interpretations of the historical documents, tell them they will be watching a video segment and a multimedia presentation as preparation for a homework assignment. Distribute copies of the “Islamic Civilization Assignment” and ask students to read over the questions before the screening. Have students watch the Islamic Civilization video segment and multimedia presentation. For homework, instruct them to write journal responses to the following questions:

- What impact do you think the physical distance of Spanish Jewry from the religious authority of the Babylonian academies might have had on the evolution of the Golden Age of Spain? Explain.
- Describe the Islamic civilization of Spain. Were you surprised by anything you saw/read/learned?

Learning Activity 4: Thriving Jewish Culture in Medieval Spain As Explored Through Poetry

1. Ask students to share with the class what they wrote in their journals and what they learned about the Golden Age of Spain. Explain that they will now use what they have learned to interpret some of the rich cultural and artistic works created during the Golden Age.

2. Distribute copies of the handout “Golden Age for Jews.” Ask students to watch the video segment The Golden Age of Spain and its companion multimedia presentation. While they watch, they should answer the questions on the handout:

- What did you hear or learn?
- What is remarkable about these poems?
- Who are the poets? What is remarkable about them?
- What cultural changes do the authors and their poetry convey?
- What cultural interplay/connections do you notice between the predominant Islamic culture and that of the minority Jewish culture?
- What similarities do you see in the architecture, poetry, art, etc.?

Stop the video immediately after Eban says, "In Spain, Hebrew was reborn in poetry and in song." (This is approximately three minutes into the video presentation.) Ask students to gather in small groups to share their answers to the questions. Then ask the class as a whole to discuss their interpretations. During this discussion, click on "Historical Documents" and read Philosophy Added To Jewish Curriculum together as a class. Ask students to comment on the following question:

- What is the importance of this text in the context of the Golden Age of Spain?

3. As the class completes its discussion of the poems, explain to students that they will be working together to create a final project. In order to infuse this project with all they have learned, they must first take time to consider the main ideas covered in the lesson.

Distribute the “Golden Age of Spain Summary Activity” handout. Ask students to work in small groups to discuss and take notes on the questions on the handout:

- How did Hebrew develop as a living language?
- How were ideas of philosophy, modern science, and the arts introduced into Jewish schools?
- Cite examples of the interrelationship between Jewish and Islamic political, intellectual, economic, cultural, and religious realms.
- What is the relationship between an immigrant or minority culture and the dominant culture?
 - Define the words "assimilation" and "acculturation."
 - What is the difference between the two?

- How do immigrant or minority groups maintain their own unique culture without being absorbed into the dominant culture? Does the dominant culture ever adopt aspects of the immigrant or minority culture? Think of examples in the U.S. and other countries where immigration is common, such as Israel and Canada.

Encourage students to share with the class the notes they have prepared in their small groups.

4. Hand out the “Golden Age of Spain Culminating Activity” and explain that this will be “presented” during the last class. Tell students they will have several days to plan and execute this assignment, including in-class research time and homework. Ask them to read over the assignment:

Culminating Activity: Golden Age Party

Students will be responsible for researching the cultural milieu - including food, music, poetry, and art - of the period. They can use the DVD-ROM and other resources to help them. Students will then “bring back the Golden Age” for the last class - that is, they will decorate the space, serve foods from the region, play music (or have recorded music) that reflects the time and location, and present poetry in the character of various Jewish poets. When presenting poetry, students should introduce themselves with a short bio that gives substantial information about their life and occupation, and offer an explanation of the poem they will read. Poets can choose to work with partners to present the poetry and its explication. For instance, the poetry may be presented as part a panel of poets, a dialogue between poets, a dialogue between poets and their benefactors, etc. Have fun with it, and make it interesting and meaningful. Below are a number of helpful resources.

Recommended books and Web sites that contain poems:

Remie, Olivia. *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim, and Jewish Sources (The Middle Ages Series)*. University of Pennsylvania Press, May 1997.

The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse, edited and translated by T. Carmi.

The Jewish Poets of Spain, 900-1250, translation and notes by David Goldstein, 1965.

All of the following Web sites have poems and biographical information about the poets:

Jewish Heritage Online Magazine: Golden Age Poetry in 10th Century Spain
http://www.jhom.com/personalities/shmuel_hanagid/golden_age.htm

Gates to Jewish Heritage: Dunash Ben Labrat
http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=220

Gates to Jewish Heritage: Moses ibn Ezra

http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=236

Gates to Jewish Heritage: Judah HaLevi

http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=304

Gates to Jewish Heritage: Isaac ben Judah ibn Ghayyat

http://www.jewishgates.com/file.asp?File_ID=226

In addition, the DVD-ROM has Three Poems that can be used. The music and art presented on the DVD-ROM will provide some inspiration for the "setting" of the Golden Age party, particularly the video segment Golden Age.

- Students may select their particular "contribution" to the event. This will enable them to "shine" as they would like (musically, theatrically, artistically, through culinary skill, etc.).
- Decide if there are any limitations on what foods may be brought - for instance, if they need to be prepared at the school or if they can be prepared at home. Recipes should be included.
- Students who research and/or perform music should include the reference information for what they will present.
- Students presenting poetry should turn in a typed biography of the poet they are impersonating and a copy of the poem for each member of the class.
- This group production should provide the students with the feeling of being participants in the Golden Age of Spain.