

## **Video Clip: Judeo-Median Languages** The Lesser Known Jewish Languages of Iran

Jews in Iran historically spoke many languages - from Persian, Semitic, and Median language families. The languages of Jews in different cities and towns were so different that their speakers often could not understand each other. Now these longstanding Jewish languages are endangered, as most Jews shifted to standard Persian in Iran or to Modern Hebrew, English, and other languages after emigrating. How did these languages develop? How do they differ from their surrounding Jewish and non-Jewish languages? And what is being done to save these endangered languages before it's too late?

### **Suggested Implementation**

#### History

1. Jews of the Middle East
2. What has historically given Jews their identities, separate from and similar to their surrounding cultures?
3. Languages becoming endangered
4. Efforts and reasons to pass on traditions to future generations

#### Culture

1. Music, language, and culture of Middle Eastern Jews

### **Background**

While most Iranian Jews speak Jewish dialects of the Persian Language, many in the older generations spoke a whole different set of Jewish languages. But they weren't speaking Yiddish or Ladino, or Hebrew or Aramaic—they were speaking what linguists call Judeo-Median.

These languages, which mix Hebrew words with the ancient Median language, are often difficult for Persian speakers to understand. Jewish communities in the cities of the Central Plateau have kept these special languages alive for thousands of years.

In the centuries after Cyrus the Great of the Persian Empire conquered the Median Empire in 550 BCE, Aramaic, Persian and Median were all spoken in the region. Jews, who at one point made up over 20% of the population of Persia, helped found important cities like Esfahan, and populated nearly every town and village in what is now Iran.

As other Empires and languages came and went, Jews kept their languages and traditions alive in the *mahallehs*, Jewish neighborhoods. From Yazd and Kerman to Borujerd and Hamedan, these Judeo-Median languages stayed alive as languages only the Jews could understand. Every city may have once had a Jewish dialect that disappeared over the years, spoken by many of the famous historical Jewish figures of Iran, and some elders today still speak these languages.

The southwestern language, Judeo-Shirazi, has preserved conservative forms that somewhat resemble the language of famous medieval poets like Hafez, but Judeo-Median languages have roots in a branch that diverged hundreds of years earlier. Judeo-Median grammar more-closely resembles other northwestern Iranian languages like Balochi, Gilaki, and Kurdish, than it does the Southwestern Persian language also spoken by nearly all Iranian Jews.

In the last decade, researchers have started trying to collect more data in these languages to better understand, record, and revive them. Languages are some of the most detailed data available to help understand a culture, its characters, and the events of its past, and each dialect potentially holds clues to the hidden stories of nearly three thousand years of Iranian Jews.

The drive to document these languages is a huge opportunity to save our communities and history from oblivion.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. What does the existence of separate Jewish languages (like Yiddish, Ladino, Aramaic, and Judeo-Median) say about Jewish communities living in those places? Could Jewish languages serve as a way to be secretive? To hold on to an identity? And what does it say about those communities that they even developed these languages, instead of holding on to the original Hebrew language of their ancestors?
2. What are some other examples of Jewish languages? What makes something a Jewish language? Could English peppered with Hebrew phrases be called Jewish English, or does it have to be more different than that?
3. What is lost when a language disappears? Do the languages we speak help us connect to any other aspects of culture? Why might speakers of Judeo-Median Languages want to teach their children these languages in addition to Persian, Hebrew, or English?
4. Look at the words Persian-origin Jews use when speaking English:  
<https://jel.jewish-languages.org/words?use=1000>
  - a. What languages are these words from? (Persian and Arabic because Persian includes many Arabic words). Why are there no words from Judeo-Median languages like Judeo-Hamedani and Judeo-Isfahani? Because Jews in Iran had shifted from those languages to standard Persian in the 20<sup>th</sup> century because of Iranian educational policies that required instruction in standard Persian. When Iranian Jews immigrated to the United States and England and picked up English, they maintained some Persian words but few or no words from the historical Judeo-Median languages.
5. What makes languages such an important part of heritage?
6. If you knew that there was one speaker left of a language, and you wanted to help them record and preserve that language, how would you go about doing that?

## **Suggested Readings/Materials**

Jewish Language Website:

<https://www.jewishlanguages.org/>

Borjian, Habib. "What is Judeo-Median and how does it differ from Judeo-Persian?". The Journal of Jewish Languages, 2014:

[https://www.jewishlanguages.org/files/ugd/288ea6\\_b8db0d66cdf4cf1a494ac5e0a8a3172.pdf](https://www.jewishlanguages.org/files/ugd/288ea6_b8db0d66cdf4cf1a494ac5e0a8a3172.pdf)

Young Jews learning ancestral languages from their grandparents:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojeYAfM8mYI>

Jewish Languages Judeo-Iranian page:

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

Videos of people speaking Judeo-Median languages:

<https://www.elalliance.org/projects/jewish-languages>

Videos of people speaking Judeo-Median languages:

<https://www.lashon.org/1/taxonomy/term/138>

Videos of people speaking Judeo-Median languages:

<https://www.7dorim.com/gooyesh-ha/>