

Henna In Judaism

The ancient Sephardic tradition



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The ancient henna ritual, steeped in the Sephardic tradition, is a prime example of our rich and diverse Jewish heritage. Associated with joy, luck, and transformation, the adornment of the body with this natural, temporary dye brings life cycle events to a whole new level.

The henna plant is a desert shrub, with sweet-scented white, red, pink or yellow flowers. Preferring hot climates and long droughts, henna thrives in areas such as India, Africa, and Israel, and it has consequently become engrained in many cultures. The almond-shaped leaves are the source of the red-brown dye used for designing temporary stains on the skin.

Jewish communities from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Spain and Morocco have had a special affinity for henna through the ages because of its reference in the Torah. *Cofet*, the biblical term for henna, is mentioned in the Song of Songs.

“My beloved is unto me as a cluster of henna in the vineyards of En-Gedi” —Song of Songs, 1:14.

Rashi, a Jewish scholar from 11th-century France, interpreted henna here as a metaphor for absolution, showing that God forgave those who tested Him in the desert. So too a bride and groom, in the Sephardic henna wedding ritual, are given a clean slate with which to begin their lives together.

In biblical Israel, henna was cultivated as a hedge around vineyards to hold soil against wind erosion, protecting the vulnerable, valuable crop from hungry animals. The clusters of fragrant flowers growing on the dense henna plant can imply a metaphor for a beloved who shelters a lover, also consistent with the wedding theme.

Henna leaves are dried and then ground into a powder to release the dye-producing lawsone molecule. Mixed with water, the powder becomes a paste. Adding lemon juice or essential oils such as tea tree, eucalyptus, or lavender will improve skin stain characteristics.

After being applied, henna will stain the skin within minutes, though the longer the paste is left on the skin, the darker the color will be. The paste flakes off within two hours, and the hue darkens over the following days to a reddish brown. Although the result is commonly referred to as henna tattoo, no needles are used, and the dye will fade completely after two to three weeks. *

Sephardic traditions vary widely, as their origins span far geographically. Henna tattoo has been used to commemorate birth, death and b'nai mitzvah through Sephardic Jewish history, as well as to celebrate holidays such as Purim. Yet the most common use of henna in Sephardic culture is in celebration of betrothal.

The modern-day Hebrew word for henna, *hina*, has come to represent the three mitzvot specifically for wives. Chet stands for challah, or the taking of a portion of dough when baking challah. Nun stands for nida, or maintaining family purity, and hay stands for hadlakat neivot, lighting candles.

Miriam Moienzadeh is an Iranian Jew and Baltimorean belonging to Ohr Hamizrach Sephardic Center. She shared, “It’s a custom that my mother did, and my grandmother, and my great-grandmother...and it brings happiness and good luck. You feel you have a simcha. The wedding is coming and it’s a good feeling.”

Writer Lauren Geldzahler received henna tattoos at her sister’s bachelorette party.



The “hina,” or henna ceremony, is celebrated approximately one week before the wedding. Typically, the bride and her guests will dye their skin, although in some cases the groom joins in, too.

“We put it on all of our fingers, and on the fronts and the backs of our hands,” explained Ms. Moienzadeh, from the Iranian perspective. “The mother-in-law makes the henna, she puts the henna on her daughter-in-law, and then out of respect, the older women get it before the younger women.”

Andrea Suissa of Olney, who is Ashkenazi and married a Moroccan man, described her henna ceremony. “My mother-in-law added a blossom scent to the henna, similar to rosewater...she entered the room with a bowl of henna with a candle in it—this shows the guests where the henna is, and that it’s ‘on its way out.’”

According to Sandhya Patangay, New York-based henna artist and historian, “Whereas going to the *mikvah* is a serious ritual designed for spiritual purity, this is a pre-wedding custom more about fun and celebration.”

“It starts off the wedding celebration,” echoed Ms. Suissa. “You can just feel it in the air that everybody’s

happy, everybody wants good luck for you.”

With plenty of singing and feasting but no prayers uttered, the henna ritual is not particularly religious, yet many agree that there is a spiritual significance.

“... This is a pre-wedding custom more about fun and celebration.”

—Sandhya Patangay

According to Ms. Patangay, Yemenite Sephardim believe that “Henna, by changing its color from green powder to red paste, prevents the evil eye from recognizing the bride and groom and also symbolizes the transformation undergone by the couple during the rite of passage.”

And from the Moroccan perspective, Ms. Suissa said, “Having it done to your hands relates to the *hamsa* which relates to the evil eye... The theory is that if anything bad is directed towards you or your

marriage, the henna will keep it away.”

It’s no surprise that Sephardic communities originally lived in close proximity to their Muslim, Hindu and African neighbors, cultures where henna tattoo and good omens also go hand in hand.

Today, all types of people embrace this cross-cultural art of beautification and spirituality, hiring artists for wedding showers, Purim parties, to decorate bellies for maternity photos and for everything in between.

If you are interested in embellishing one of your simchahs with henna, Ms. Neha Gupta, owner of Neha Threading in Pikesville, has been creating gorgeous, all-natural henna designs for 17 years, and she would like to make her services available. Call her shop at (410) 653-2769.

*Avoid products marketed as “black henna” as they may contain the color additive p-phenylenediamine, also known as PPD, which may cause allergic reactions in some individuals and is illegal for use on the skin. Cosmetics including temporary skin-staining products that are sold on a retail basis to consumers must have their ingredients listed on the label (see www.fda.gov). □

Lauren Geldzahler is a member of the Baltimore Jewish Times art department.

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