

Say It with Proverbs

Topic

Folklore, Sephardic Culture, Judeo-Spanish Proverbs

Grade Level(s)

6th – 12th

Big Ideas

- Proverbs are anonymous metaphorical expressions that constitute part of the folklore of a culture.
- Proverbs are tools that reflect the worldviews and values of a particular culture.

Learning Targets

Students will:

- Define proverbs and their role as an expression of folk wisdom
- Become familiar with Judeo-Spanish or Ladino, the language of *Sephardim*
- Explore several Judeo-Spanish proverbs as means to transmit collective values, customs, and traditions of Sephardim

Materials / Technology Needed

- Post-it Super Sticky Wall sheets (Post-it Easel Pad, 25" x 3) and colored markers
- [Me'am Lo'ez](#)
- Rashi Script (see page 7)
- [Cuando el Rey Nimrod Song](#) (When King Nimrod); Cuando el Rey Nimrod [lyrics](#)
- [Ocho Kandelikas](#) (Eight Candles); [Ocho Kandelikas lyrics](#)
- [Padlet.com](#)
- [13 Essential Ladino Words and Phrases](#)
- [5 Jewish Languages You Didn't Know Existed](#)
- [Morfix](#), [quizlet.com](#)

Relevant Vocabulary

מִשְׁלֵי (Mishlei)	Book of Proverbs – Second book of <i>Ketuvim</i> , the third section of the <i>Tanakh</i>
תנ"ך (<i>Tanakh</i> ; an acronym of <i>Torah</i> , <i>Nevi'im</i> , <i>Ketuvim</i>)	The Hebrew Bible (Torah, Prophets, Writings)
סְפִרֹת הַחֻמָּה (<i>Sifrut Hahohmah</i>)	Wisdom Literature
סְפָרְדִים (<i>Sephardim</i>)	Jews of Spanish and/or Portuguese heritage.
סְפָרַד (<i>Sefarad</i>)	Spain
מַעַם לוֹעֵז (<i>Me'am Lo'ez</i>)	A commentary on the <i>Tanakh</i> written in Judeo-Spanish. <i>Lo'ez</i> means "foreign language" and refers to the fact that the book was not written in Hebrew.

Say It with Proverbs

Prepare in Advance

Place Post-it Super Sticky Wall sheets on the classroom walls (one Post-it sheet per two learners) and place markers by each sheet.

Background for Teachers

Proverbs are anonymous metaphorical expressions that reflect the worldview and values of a particular culture. Containing kernels of truth, they are maxims that have stood the test of time and have been transmitted from generation to generation since the dawn of time. The *Tanakh* contains one of the oldest surviving collections of proverbs, the book of *Mishlei*, which is traditionally credited to King Solomon.

Even though the history of Jews in the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) is fascinating, this activity will not attempt to cover this vast topic. Suffice it to say that, documented since 305 C.E. and 482 C.E., Jews lived uninterruptedly in the Iberian Peninsula until they were expelled from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1496-7. Expelled Jews from Spain tended to settle in the Ottoman Empire (Turkey and Greece) and North Africa (Morocco), while Jews from Portugal tended to settle in Amsterdam; Salonika, Greece; and New Amsterdam (New York). These exiled Sephardic Jews took with them a unique culture and traditions.

Ladino¹ is the name most used for the spoken and written language of the Sephardim in exile. Ladino is also known as Judeo-Spanish, Judezmo, Judjo, Spanyolit, and Haketia (in Morocco). The Sephardim preserved the language of Spain as their own, especially the core elements of Old Spanish (mainly Castilian from the 14th and 15th centuries) to use at home and in business. The insularity of the language, compounded by the creation of Jewish Sephardic immigrant communities, resulted in Ladino being used to communicate among fellow Jews but not with the outside world. Given the fact that, for many generations after the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, Ladino was used mainly orally while Hebrew was the language of the rabbinical elite, Rabbi Ya'akov Khuli decided to publish [*Me'am Lo'ez*](#) in 1730 in Ladino to bridge the cultural gap. In addition, Sephardim in exile developed for five centuries a rich folklore, including romances, stories, songs, proverbs, idioms, and riddles. Ladino was written in either Rashi script, Hebrew script, or in Solitreo (which is a Hebrew script unique to Spanyolit).

1. We will use Ladino and Judeo-Spanish interchangeably.

Say It with Proverbs

Short and witty, easy to memorize, proverbs moved with Sephardic Jews and became a distinctive feature of Sephardic life, occurring in everyday speech. Henry Besso², a scholar of Sephardi studies, said: “The language spoken by the Sephardim has been outstanding in its richness of proverbs. When one hears a Sephardi talk of «refranes³», one gets the impression” that he is imitating King Solomon with his «proverbs»³.

The history of Judeo-Spanish paremiology⁴ contains proverbs drawn from biblical and Talmudic sources, while others had Spanish origin. Still other proverbs were Ladino translations of proverbs in Turkish, French, and other languages from countries where the exiled Sephardic Jews settled. The collection of Judeo-Spanish proverbs by philologists and researchers began in the 19th century to preserve Sephardic culture. In this activity, we will focus on Judeo-Spanish proverbs containing Hebrew words and Jewish references that were instrumental in hiding meaning from non-Jews and facilitating connections among Jews scattered across many lands. Utilizing the knowledge of Spanish and Hebrew that many of our learners have and their familiarity with concise types of communication (X, Email, SMS, MMS, etc.), proverbs, which resemble shorts-forms of communication, can be used as didactic tools to get acquainted with Sephardic culture and moral wisdom.

Description of Activities

1. Ask each pair of learners to find a Post-it Super Sticky Wall sheet and markers and write 3-5 proverbs they know by heart in English (for example: Actions speak louder than words; A bird in hand is worth two in the bush; Children should be seen not heard; Measure twice. Cut once).
2. Ask learners to share their proverbs and vote on funniest proverbs, most descriptive, oddest, hardest to understand for a visitor from another planet.
3. After learners share and vote, ask them to define proverbs using [Answergarden](#) (using up to 40 characters).

2. Besso, Henry. Judeo-Spanish Proverbs: Their philosophy and their teaching. In *Bulletin Hispanique*. Tome 50, Number 3-4, 1948.
3. Refranes – proverbs in Spanish.
4. Paremiology is the collection and study of paroemias (proverbs).

Say It with Proverbs

4. Discuss:
 - a. Definition and common characteristics of proverbs (brief, witty, easy to remember, learning tool, need to know when to use it in the appropriate context, etc.)
 - b. Role of proverbs in folklore (communicate values, morals, etc.).
 - c. Henry Besso says: “Proverbs embrace hundreds of subjects, and no part of human life is untouched by them.” Why do you think he says this?
5. Play Ladino songs: “Cuando el rey Nimrod,” “Ocho Kandelikas,” or another Ladino song of your liking in order to give learners a sense of the sounds and cadences of the language.
6. Explain the history of the Judeo-Spanish or Ladino language by providing examples (using vocabulary from the songs or “[13 Essential Ladino Words and Phrases](#)”). Learners studying Spanish as a foreign language in school will have an easy time understanding the proverbs. Show learners the *Me’am Loez* written in Ladino with Rashi⁵ script (see Rashi script on page 7).
7. Show learners the 15 Judeo-Spanish proverbs on pages 8 – 11. Explain that each Judeo-Spanish proverb in this activity contains at least one or more Hebrew words. (Hebrew words are highlighted in yellow.) Let learners brainstorm and think what each proverb means literally and figuratively. Use [Padlet.com](#) to collect learners’ answers. If technology is not available, use the remainder of the Post-it Super Sticky Wall sheets to record learners’ ideas. Review each proverb and discuss its literal and figurative meanings.
8. Discuss the role of Judeo-Spanish proverbs and why was it necessary for Sephardic Jews to use them in the milieu they were living. Ask learners what function the Hebrew words contain in each proverb (some answers below).
 - a. Like folktales, proverbs reflect the customs, beliefs, and way of life of a particular group.
 - b. The Hebrew words in the proverbs provide the “linguistic material” enabling the expression of Jewish concept of the culture and the identity of the entire Sephardic community.
5. Rashi script or *Ktav Rashi* is a compact typeface for the Hebrew alphabet. The ancient typeface is based on 15th-century Sephardic handwriting. Rashi’s Torah and Talmud commentaries are written in Rashi script.

Say It with Proverbs

- a. Judeo-Spanish proverbs draw from Jewish sources—Hebrew and Aramaic—like other Jewish languages such as Yiddish and Judeo-Arabic.
- b. Proverbs based on Biblical and Talmudic texts are not always verbatim and therefore it is necessary to know that canonical meaning to understand the proverb.
- c. Proverbs in general are used as substitutes for things Sephardic Jews may have felt uncomfortable speaking of directly.
- d. Proverbs containing Hebrew verbs specifically may have functioned to communicate among Jews; namely they are used as a “hidden” language that only Jews can understand. For example: think of a social situation in which you are walking with your Jewish friend, and someone approaches you with a sad face. You can say to your Jewish friend in Ladino “Kara de *Tisha B’av*.” Only a fellow Jew who knows what *Tisha B’av* is will understand what you are saying, namely that this person is unhappy.
- e. According to Marc Angel, Rabbi Emeritus of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in New York and author whose ancestors were Sephardim from Turkey, “Sephardim have a profound affinity for religious traditions, family life and community. Sephardic Jews, rich and poor regard Shabbat, and Jewish holidays as great respites from the daily life challenges.”

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Create flashcards of the Hebrew words in each one of the proverbs with their English translations (use [Morfix](#) online Hebrew-English, English-Hebrew dictionary, and [quizlet.com](#) to create digital flashcards). Use paper flashcards if digital version is not available.
- Illustrate each one of the proverbs.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Learners compare different Jewish languages (Judeo-Spanish, Yiddish, Aramaic, Judeo-Arabic, Hebrew). Have learners watch “[5 Jewish Languages You Didn’t Know Existed](#).”

Say It with Proverbs

- According to Henry Besso, a scholar of Sephardic studies, to appreciate the proverbs properly one must understand the language. Translations will help convey the meaning but are not enough to capture the wit of the original.” What would you respond to Besso?
- Learners compose their own proverbs based on their own experiences being Jewish in a non-Jewish country.

Say It with Proverbs

Hebrew Letters in Rashi and Square Type				
ה = ה	ז = ז	ג = ג	ב = ב	א = א
י = י	ט = ט	ח = ח	ז = ז	ו = ו
ס = ס	מ = מ	ל = ל	ך = כ	כ = כ
פ = פ	ע = ע	ס = ס	ן = נ	נ = נ
ר = ר	ק = ק	ץ = צ	ש = ש	ף = פ
		ת = ת	ש = ש	

Say It with Proverbs

Judeo-Spanish Proverbs	Verbatim (V.)	Meaning (M.)
Echar <i>lashon</i>	V. - "To throw tongue." M. - Chat or even gossip	
Ke sus almas reposen en <i>Gan Eden</i>	V. - "Their souls should rest in the Garden of Eden" M.- Used when lives are lost	
<i>Purim Purim lanu,</i> <i>Pesah</i> a la mano	V. – " <i>Purim</i> is upon us, Passover is at hand" M. - Around the holiday of <i>Purim</i> we are reminded that Passover is around the corner.	
Kara de <i>Tisha B'Av</i>	V. – "Face of <i>Tisha B'Av</i> " M. – someone with an unhappy face	

Say It with Proverbs

<p>Dos <i>cudyos</i>⁶, tres <i>keilot</i>, tres <i>cudyos</i>, cuatro <i>keilot</i></p>	<p>V. – “Two Jews, three communities. Three Jews, four communities”</p> <p>M. – Systematic contradictory spirit of Jews</p>
<p>Arrovan pitas y bezan <i>mezusas</i></p>	<p>V. – “He steals pancakes and kisses <i>mezuzot</i>”</p> <p>M. – Warning against Jews and pious behavior but who exploit others and ignore moral principles; hypocrite.⁷</p>
<p><i>Alef</i> dishites ya se fue ala <i>Taf</i></p>	<p>V. – “you said <i>Alef</i> and he is already up to <i>Tav</i>”</p> <p>M. – reference to a person who can get to the bottom of an issue or understand another person’s point of view rapidly after hearing a few words</p>

6. *Cudyos* or *Djudio* – Jew.

7. This proverb echoes the chastisement of the Hebrew prophets who warned Jews against observance without moral ethical behavior.

Say It with Proverbs

<p>Komo el ahdut del <i>cudyo</i> no ay</p>	<p>V. – “There is no solidarity like the one of the Jews” M. - There is blind trust in solidarity among Jews</p>
<p>Es de v'lakach</p>	<p>V. – “(He/she) is one who takes” M. – Reference to a person who always takes from others but never gives back</p>
<p>Lo kito de hayim lo meto a Bedahayim</p>	<p>V. – “Took him out of life and put it in the cemetery” M. – A person who ruins something when trying to repair it</p>
<p>Ombre batel is para mal</p>	<p>V. – “A man void of work is no good” M. – Caution against not working. One needs to find a suitable vocation and pursuit it.</p>

Say It with Proverbs

<p>Vende pipinos, vende <i>halvah</i>⁸, I no asperes a <i>nedavah</i></p>	<p>V. – “Sell cucumbers, sell <i>halvah</i>, and do not expect anything from public charity”</p> <p>M. – A warning not to rely on other people but rather to strive to be self-sufficient</p>
<p><i>Haham, Haham,</i> <i>shetika</i></p>	<p>V. – “Wise man, wisen man, silence”</p> <p>M. – The wise man must say his opinion after careful reflection, because what he says is sometimes as influential as the law itself</p>
<p>Moses muryo <i>Adonay</i> kedo</p>	<p>V. – “Moses died, but G-d remained”</p> <p>M. – No loss is incurable if G-d is with us. Every human being is mortal, but G-d is immortal.</p>
<p>Cada cosa y su <i>mazal</i>⁹ aysta el <i>sefer</i> en el <i>heichal</i></p>	<p>V. – Each thing has its <i>mazal</i>, even the book in the Ark.</p> <p>M. – Each thing has its own destiny, even something that we would not expect to be dependent on it. This proverb linked to the Zohar alludes to the fact that even the <i>Torah</i> scroll lying in the ark among all other Torah scrolls needs luck to be picked up for reading. Namely, even affairs that are supposedly dependent on people's will, even those need <i>mazal</i>.</p>

8. *Halvah* (sweetmeat of sesame oil and nuts)

9. *Mazal* – Luck