

Ofra Haza (1957–2000)

Israel's Musical Ambassador

Biography

Ofra Haza was born on November 19, 1957, in Tel Aviv to parents who had immigrated from Yemen, and was the youngest of nine siblings. Her musical talent emerged early on, and she performed at weddings and, at the age of 12, joined the Hatikvah Quarter Theater Workshop, where she won numerous singing competitions.

After completing her military service, Haza pursued a music career, quickly rising to fame in the Israeli pop scene. She was named Israel's Singer of the Year four consecutive times (1980–1983) and, in 1983, she represented Israel in the Eurovision Song Contest, finishing second with the song "Chai" (חי).

Following her Eurovision success, Haza honored her Yemenite roots with the 1984 album, *Shirei Teiman*, which helped bring Yemenite music into mainstream Israeli culture. Her fusion of Middle Eastern sounds with contemporary music attracted international attention, leading to collaborations with global artists and the release of English-language albums. In 1992, she became the first Israeli nominated for a Grammy (Best World Music Album) for *Kirya*.

Haza's international recognition grew with performances at prestigious events. These included the 1994 Nobel Peace Prize ceremony at the invitation of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, when he won the Nobel Peace Prize along with President Shimon Peres and the head of the Palestinian Authority, Yasser Arafat, for their efforts for peace in the Middle East through the 1993 Oslo Accords. Haza won first place in both Germany's Golden Lion Music Competition and the Tokyo Song Festival in 1998.

Her voice reached new audiences when she portrayed Yocheved (Moses's mother) in the 1998 animated film *The Prince of Egypt*, singing the opening song "Deliver Us" in 18 languages. Her song "Im Nin'alu" was later featured in the 2000 film *American Psycho*.

In 2000, *Rolling Stone Magazine* ranked her among the 200 greatest singers of all time (#186), and the only Israeli artist on the list. In February 2000, Israeli radio announced the death of Ofra Haza and marked the occasion by playing her music nonstop for a full day.

Framing

Ofra Haza was a groundbreaking Israeli musician who helped bring the music, culture, and traditional dress of the Yemenite community into mainstream Israeli society. This unit explores her life and legacy while providing a deeper understanding of the unique aspects of Yemenite culture.

Scope

This unit can be completed in 3 classes of 45 minutes each:

- Introduction and Video: 5 minutes
- Activity #1 (Paint Box): 45 minutes
- Activity #2 (Yemenite Traditions: Reading Hebrew): 30 minutes
- Activity #3 (Yemenite Foods): 30 minutes

Preparing the Time Capsule

- Large Post-it notes, blank paper, and markers for the Paint Box activity.

Printing

- [Lyrics of Paint Box](#) enough for each student
- [Yemenite Traditions](#): Reading, enough for each group
- [Yemenite Food Matching Game](#), enough for each group

Activity #1: Paint Box

- Hang large Post-it notes around the room with one color listed on each (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, pink, brown, black, white, grey) and give 3–5 minutes to walk around the room and write the feelings, values, or ideas they associate with each color on the Post-it note.
- Discuss the following with the students:
 - What are the similarities and differences between the associations you made with each color?
 - Where do colors consistently appear in everyday life? (traffic lights, flags, sports, symbols like hearts and emojis)
 - What colors do you associate with peace?
- Provide the [lyrics to Paint Box](#), listen to the song, and discuss:
 - Were there similarities or differences between your color associations and the ones in the song? Have your color associations changed after listening to the song?
 - What is the difference between the colors inside and outside the paintbox?
 - What color(s) are associated with peace in the song?
 - Is there a connection between the text and melody?
 - Why do you think Ofra Haza ended the song by saying “peace” in three languages: *Shalom* (Hebrew), *Shalom* (Hebrew), and *Peace* (English)?

***Optional:** first play the song without the lyrics to encourage your students to listen carefully to the lyrics and pay attention to the melody and tune.

- Students draw their connection to Israel according to the associations they have with each color. They can then present their pictures to the class.

Activity #2: Yemenite Traditions: Reading Hebrew

The Yemenite pronunciation of Hebrew is unique and might sound less familiar to many.

- Listen to the recordings of two pronunciations of Hebrew of Psalms Chapter 1:
 - Recording 1: [Ashkenazi \(modern\) Hebrew Pronunciation](#)
 - Recording 2: [Yemenite Hebrew Pronunciation](#)
- After listening to the recordings, discuss:
 - Have you heard this pronunciation of Hebrew before? Where have you heard it?
 - Can you identify which letters or sounds are different between the two pronunciations?
- Have students mimic the unique Yemenite sounds heard in the recording.

Provide students with the [photograph](#) of Yemenite children learning to read, either by printing a copy for each student or by displaying it, and discuss:

- What is happening in the picture?
- Can you spot anything unusual about how some of the children are reading?
- How might the way they read have become an important Yemenite tradition?

The Yemenite Jewish community was very poor and could not afford for each student to have a book of their own. Therefore, the entire class shared one book, forcing some students to read from the side and others to read upside down. There are some older Yemenite Jews who still read upside-down today, as that is how they learned how to read.

- Divide the students into pairs or groups, give them five minutes to try to read the [text](#) upside-down
- Discuss with your students:
 - What is challenging about reading like this?
 - What strategies would help you learn how to read from different angles?
 - Was it easier for you to read the text upside-down after you read it right-side-up?

Activity #3: Yemenite Foods

- Students play the [Yemenite Foods Matching Game](#) to learn about five traditional Yemenite foods: how they are prepared, how they are eaten, and other interesting information about the food.
- The correct answers for this activity can be found in the Appendix.

Appendix

Additional Links

- The Librarians Blog: [When Ofra Haza Took America by Storm](#)
- Video of [Ofra Haza's 1983 Eurovision performance](#)
- [Neta Barzilai sings an updated version of Hai](#), to reflect life in Israel after October 7, 2023
- Ofra Haza as the voice of [Yocheved in The Prince of Egypt](#)

- **About Ofra's "Paint Box" Performance:** The song "Paint Box" was written by 13-year-old Tali Shurek Harpaz after the 1973 Yom Kippur War. She wrote the song for the 1974 "My Peace" youth artistic expression competition and won first place. The song was put to music by Kobi Oshrat and first performed by Ofra Haza in 1978. Originally written in Hebrew, it was later translated into English. This song is often played during the ceremony between Yom HaZikaron (Memorial Day) and Yom Ha'atzmaut (Independence Day) to express the multiplicity of feelings felt at that time. "Paint Box" was performed in 1994 during a pivotal time in Israeli politics. The country was deeply divided over the Oslo peace process, experiencing fear, hope, uncertainty, and longing for peace, similar to feelings in Israel today.
- **Yemenite Jewish History:** The Jews of Yemen can trace their origins back 2,000 years. Although no one is exactly sure how the Jews arrived in Yemen, there are two main theories. First, King Solomon sent Jews to Yemen to get gold and silver to build the first Temple, and some remained in Yemen. Second, the prophet Jeremiah led a small group of Jews to Yemen following the destruction of the First Temple, and more Jews joined them after the destruction of the Second Temple. By the early Islamic period, Yemenite Jews had established a distinct and resilient community, contributing to local trade, crafts, and religious scholarship. Despite periods of tolerance, they often faced persecution, including forced conversions and social restrictions under Islamic rule. The community developed a unique, religious, and cultural identity, maintaining ancient Hebrew pronunciation, distinct liturgical traditions, and skilled silverwork craftsmanship. In the 20th century, worsening conditions led to large-scale emigration to Ottoman-controlled Palestine, and later, the State of Israel. *Operation Magic Carpet* brought nearly 50,000 Yemenite Jews to Israel in 1949. By the early 21st century, only a handful of Jews remained in Yemen due to ongoing instability and persecution. Today, the music, traditions, and religious customs of Yemenite Jewry live on and thrive primarily in Israel.

Correct Activity Answers

- Yemenite Food Matching Game Answers
 - **Malawah** / מלאווח
 - A flaky bread with very thin layers.
 - The translation of the word means flat.
 - Served with honey, cheese, or dips.
 - Usually eaten for breakfast.
 - **Jachnun** / ג'חנן
 - A slow-cooked, rolled pastry that is slightly sweet.
 - Traditionally cooked in a taboon (clay pot) buried in a pit of coals.

- Usually eaten with tomato sauce, zhug, and hard-boiled eggs.
- Tel Aviv has a festival where professional chefs and everyday cooks share their best traditional and modernized recipes for this food.
- **Zhug / זחוג**
 - A spicy herb-based sauce, usually made with cilantro, garlic, and chili peppers.
 - A sauce that is often added to anything to add spice, like falafel or shawarma.
 - Also known in Hebrew as חריף/harif, which means spicy.
 - Comes in different colors: red is made with red chili peppers, green is made with green chili peppers, and brown is made with tomato puree.
- **Kubaneh / קבאנה**
 - This bread is cooked covered and overnight in a special round metal container.
 - Usually eaten for breakfast on Shabbat morning.
 - Different flours were used depending on when it is being served. Cornmeal if it is being eaten during the week, and wheat flour if it is being eaten on Shabbat.
 - Eggs in their shell are inserted into the dough and cooked with the dough.
- **Lachuch / לחוח**
 - Usually eaten with a yogurt dip and red zhug.
 - Has the texture of a sponge.
 - Has many holes to soak up all of the sauce eaten with it.
 - Thought of as the Yemenite pancake.