

# Jewish Inspirations for Worldbuilding and Adventuring

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*Written for Doikayt, an anthology of Jewish storytelling games*

Jewish history, folklore, religion, and mythology can provide wonderful inspiration that you can incorporate into your roleplaying games. The following are adventure hooks, scenarios, minigames, and historical background that you can weave into your sessions or incorporate into a new game that you design.

This chapter is far from comprehensive – Jewish culture and tradition is incredibly broad and diverse and we can only explore a small portion of it here. My goal is to give you a sampling from different parts of Jewish traditions and perhaps inspire further research.

This guide is written with the intended audience of Jewish players and game designers, and for games where the protagonists are Jewish. If you are not Jewish, tread carefully and avoid using stereotypes during play.

# European Jews in the Middle Ages

Many storytelling games are set in fantastic versions of Europe in the Middle Ages (roughly 5th-15th century) but they often lack Jewish influence or perspective. If you're running a game or building a world that's inspired by the Middle Ages, here are some significant aspects of the Jewish experience that you may want to include.

Much of Jewish life in that time was shaped by the attitudes and policies of local leaders. In Eastern Europe, the Magdeburg Rights were a series of local laws that granted Jews economic and political rights, leading to mass migration from more antisemitic regions. The Catholic church varied wildly in its treatment of the Jews. Some Popes would issue orders protecting Jews while others would enforce deeply antisemitic policies.

Local leaders would often use Jews as scapegoats for any number of local problems including natural disasters and the bubonic plague. This would often lead to pogroms and massacres by their neighbors. Such antisemitism could peak with official expulsion of Jews from the land, as happened in England (1290), France (1394), and Spain (1492).

Despite waves of persecution, European Jews were able to benefit from several golden ages throughout the medieval period. Jews flourished in Iberia under the Caliphate of Córdoba and in Poland. In both cases, the regions became hubs of Jewish culture and philosophy.

## Middle Ages Story Hooks

- A local ruler is considering a new set of laws that will cover the Jews in your lands. How do you persuade them to implement favorable laws which will increase safety and avoid antisemitic laws that will lead to persecution?
- You've heard rumors of another Crusade which will pass through your lands on the way to fight some far off enemy. The last time this happened, Crusaders massacred and looted local Jewish communities. How can you work with the local political and religious leaders to keep your community safe?
- The rulers of your land have issued a new edict expelling its Jewish population. How do you help the Jewish community flee across a hostile landscape to settle in new lands?
- Inquisitors are closing in on a community of Crypto-Jews who are practicing Judaism in secret after converting to avoid expulsion. If caught, these Jews might be tortured or burned alive – how do you help them escape their fate?

## Regional Worldbuilding Minigame

Local attitudes toward Jews changed dramatically throughout the Middle Ages, varying from actively encouraging Jewish settlement to active hostility through massacres and expulsions. If you're running a game with Jewish characters, use this minigame to determine the status and safety of Jews in different regions of your world.

For each polity (kingdom, city-state, etc), roll a six-sided dice and read the corresponding section on the chart below. Answer the questions tied to that stage.

As your game progresses, consider if the characters' actions might cause a shift from one stage to another. Achieving or preventing a shift might even be the goal of some characters or the focus of play.

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<p>1. No significant contact or relationships with Jews</p>	<p>Why haven't Jews migrated here?</p> <p>What about this region might attract Jews in the future?</p>
<p>2. Jews first engage with a new polity through merchant trade and commerce.</p>	<p>Are any Jewish traditions difficult to maintain here?</p> <p>What are the commercial draws that bring Jews here?</p>
<p>3. Local political leaders create laws that are favorable to the Jews in the hopes of boosting the economy; Jews immigrate to the region with hopes of safety and prosperity.</p>	<p>Which local leaders are most supportive of the Jews? Are any opposed to the new laws?</p> <p>What is the hardest thing for Jews to adapt to here?</p>
<p>4. A Golden Age emerges for Jews and their host country. Jewish culture, language, and folklore are influenced by their neighbors.</p>	<p>What local traditions have the biggest impact on Jewish culture here?</p> <p>Which parts of Jewish life flourish most? Philosophy, art, science, community?</p>
<p>5. Leaders scapegoat the local Jews, implement antisemitic laws, and encourage pogroms and massacres.</p>	<p>What local troubles have led leaders to scapegoat the Jews?</p> <p>Which locals help the Jews despite the risks?</p>
<p>6. Jews are forced to decide between expulsion or forced conversion. Many flee their homes in search of a better life elsewhere.</p>	<p>How do Jews maintain their traditions in secret?</p> <p>Where do the exiles flee?</p>

# Mythology and Folklore

## Dybbuk and Ibbur

Dybbuks and ibburs are both souls of the deceased who come to possess the living but they have very different goals and methods. An ibbur is the soul of someone who was righteous and good while they were alive. They're temporarily possessing a living body, perhaps with consent, with the goal of performing a mitzvah or conducting an important task. With their goal accomplished, they leave the possessed body.

Dybbuks, however, may be malevolent and possess a body to enact revenge or punishment. Like ibburs, they will maintain their possession until they accomplish their goal, or perhaps if exorcised. There were superstitions about what might allow a Dybbuk into one's house; for example: an improperly maintained mezuzah or a resident lacking enough faith.

### Dybbuk and Ibbur story hooks:

- The characters can come across a spirit possessing a human and must first determine if it is a dybbuk or ibbur and then decide if and how to help it.
- The party might be a group of shtetl "ghostbusters" with the responsibility of peacefully resolving dybbuk and ibbur possessions throughout the region
- If a player's character or an NPC dies, perhaps they comes back as dybbuk or ibbur until the current mission is completed

## Scenario: Shtetl Spirits

**Situation:** A Jewish shtetl is haunted by a Dybbuk and an Ibbur. The community is terrified and if the situation isn't resolved soon, Christians may interfere. The Dybbuk and Ibbur were both victims of a recent pogrom and have goals that are keeping them tied to the town - they keep switching to new bodies making it hard to pin them down and to know which is which.

**Goal:** understand what the spirits want and either help them accomplish their goals or banish them before the Abbot intervenes.

### Key Characters:

- The Dybbuk is the soul of a Jewish tailor who was often bullied by the local Christians. He was killed while bringing home a new menorah. As a dybbuk he has been attacking local Christians and destroying their property.
- The Ibbur is the soul of a Jewish matchmaker who spent her life helping the community. She won't rest until she finds matches for several eligible bachelors.
- The Rabbi is the community leader but at a loss of how to deal with this situation.
- The Abbot is suspicious of what's happening and suspects the work of sorcerers.

## Golem

Perhaps the most famous creature of Jewish myth, golems are simple beings that are created from mud by inscribing them with a secret, holy word. In most golem stories, the creatures are created by a rabbi to protect a Jewish community from a threat. In some stories a character gives the golem a vague or incomplete command and comedy or tragedy ensues. Golems can be destroyed by erasing or scratching out the holy word that animates them.

### Golem story hooks:

- The characters are tasked with learning the secret word that will animate a Golem. They might obtain this word from the lost notes of a great scholar or perhaps from a lineage of righteous rabbis who pass the knowledge down from one generation to the next.
- A town has lost control of a golem and it is wrecking the building and threatening the inhabitants – can the players defuse the situation and restore order?
- The characters discover an ancient golem hidden in an attic or cellar after it was no longer needed; how will they deal with such a powerful and dangerous being?
- A group of rabbis have created a hoard of golems and use them to power a small town. They are used to harvest crops, grind flour, build new houses and shops, and provide transport via carried palanquin – all in addition to ensuring the town’s security.

### Scenario: Renegade Golem

**Situation:** A junior Rabbi created a Golem to protect the local Jews from a pogrom. The Golem was successful but the Rabbi died before he could unmake the creature. The Golem is now rampaging through town and attacking any perceived threats to the Jews.

**Goal:** resolve this crisis in a way that favors the Jewish community

### Key characters:

- The local Baron who is threatening to call in the military and expel the Jews
- The head Rabbi who is desperately searching for the method to deactivate the Golem
- The local Priest who is sympathetic to the local Jews but has pressure from the church to oppress the Jewish community
- The Golem, rampaging through town

## Leviathan, Behemoth, Ziz

Jewish mythology features a trio of legendary creatures: Leviathan, a gigantic sea monster of the Mediterranean who eats one whale a day; Behemoth, a desert beast with features of an elephant, rhinoceros, and hippopotamus; and Ziz, a massive bird that can block out the sun and lay eggs whose yolk could drown cities.

These creatures are near invincible and most characters should seek to avoid them at all costs. If they do encounter them, the best tack is likely avoiding their notice and rapidly fleeing to a safer location.

### Scenario: Mega-Golem, Defender of Cities

**Situation:** After generations of absence, Leviathan, Behemoth, and Ziv have returned to terrorize the land. They are tearing apart the nearest city and the only hope is to build a multi-story Golem large enough to fight them off.

#### Key tasks:

- Discover the secret word that can animate the Golem. This knowledge is maintained by a lineage of righteous Rabbis who live out in the desert – how do you find them and convince them to help?
- You need a massive source of clay to create the Mega-Golem but the river is under attack from Leviathan. How will you safely gather enough clay?
- With the Mega-Golem animated, it's time for a showdown with the three monsters. How do you tip the scales in Mega-Golem's favor?
- With the three monsters defeated, how do you help the city rebuild?

## Divination & Oneiromancy

Jewish tradition has mixed things to say about divination. Certain types are prohibited, for example: necromancy, astrology, idol worship, and reading animal entrails. Other types are found throughout the Torah and Talmud, though perhaps none as prevalent as oneiromancy: the practice of dream interpretation.

The Talmud has a variety of oneiromantic anecdotes and specific guidance (see Berakhot 55a-57b). A key line is “All dreams follow the mouth” meaning that any divinatory power comes from engaging in interpreting the dreams not from the dreaming itself. The anecdotes also make clear that oneiromancy is so vague that you can read any interpretation into any dream. Dreams have been described as 1/60th prophecy.

### Divination story hooks:

- A local ruler believes deeply in the power of oneiromancy – find a way to interpret those dreams in a way that gains trust or favor.
- An ally has interpreted a ruler’s dream in an unusual way and now the characters must ensure that interpretation comes true so that their ally isn’t punished.
- Before starting the session, players share snippets of their most recent dreams and use them as inspiration for the setting or adventure they’re about to play

# Worldbuilding and the Jewish Diaspora

Diaspora and migration have been massive patterns across Jewish history. The causes have varied from expulsion and deportation, flights for safety, and seeking opportunity. This has led to Jewish communities spread throughout the world and a flourishing of diverse Jewish subcultures. The following are themes that might be relevant in game settings that involve a diaspora. If you're building a diaspora culture into your game, consider adding some or all elements of all of the following:

**Networks:** when a diaspora is broadly distributed, the local communities can become safe havens for travelers and merchants. The spread of families and communities across multiple regions can enable complex networks of trade as well as a natural hedge against any one place becoming too hostile to remain.

**Specialization:** diaspora communities might end up specializing in certain types of professions. Sometimes this is because specific careers are forbidden to them by law and there might be unmet demand for other jobs due to their neighbors' religious restrictions.

**Persecution:** diaspora communities can be seen as "other" or foreign, even generations after they've settled in a new land. They are easy targets for populist rulers to use as scapegoats: cultural differences can be highlighted, they can accuse them of dual loyalties, their wealth can be expropriated, and violence against them can be an outlet for otherwise discontent masses. The work of maintaining a community's safety and security is never over.

**Homeland:** the result of the above might be a desire for a place where the community is not othered, subjugated, or otherwise vulnerable to an intolerant majority. Depending on the community this might be expressed through yearning or there might be active steps to create or return to a real homeland. Some communities or portions of a community might instead focus their energy on the challenges facing each diaspora community; the Bundist concept of Doikayt is specifically about this. If you're incorporating diaspora communities into your games, how do they wrestle with this tension?

**Assimilation:** local rulers might push for assimilation to increase homogeneity or national identity while the community itself might want to at least partially assimilate in the hope of reducing hostility from their neighbors.



## Character Building Minigame

The players' characters all come from different regions of the diaspora. Take turns describing how your character's traditions are markedly different from the character of the player to your left. Then take turns describing a tradition your character cherishes that is shared with the character of the player to the right.

### Roll for Community

As the song goes: "Wherever you go, there's always someone Jewish." In your game, players might come to a new area and look for connections, shelter, or community among people from their shared religion. If it's interesting for them to have a mixed success, some trade-offs might include:

- The community here is heavily persecuted and has gone underground. How do you find them and win their trust?
- The community here has some traditions that are significantly different from that of the characters. How do these differences manifest and what do the characters miss?
- There is a community here that pretends to share your religion but in fact seeks to convert you to theirs. What tips you off and how do you navigate the situation?