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Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in America

The Jewish Role in American Life

An Annual Review of the Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life
Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in America

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Volume 13

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Saba Soomekh, Guest Editor
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As a child of Ashkenazi Jewish Holocaust survivors, I grew up in a Queens, New York shtetl, seeing the world divided not only between Jews and non-Jews, but between post-war Jewish immigrants who referred to themselves as “greeners” and their American-born children. Yet there was another world of Jewish immigrants who were little known to Ashkenazi offspring such as myself—a Sephardic and Mizrahi world that was experiencing distinct yet similar battles between the preservation of their unique Sephardic heritage and their desire to achieve the American dream in a place where fellow Jews—let alone Christians—were not always so accepting of their cultural and religious differences.

This volume explores the myriad ways in which Sephardic immigrant communities have engaged in the timeless struggle of how to remain distinct yet successful Americans. From geographic to linguistic to religious to artistic struggles involving the multiplicity of identities that mark immigrant communities, this volume examines how Jews from Rhodes, Morocco, Iran, Iraq and Egypt have experienced many of the same the challenges that Ashkenazi Jews contended with for decades. While Hollywood may have built an image of the American Jew as a bespectacled Woody Allen who is seen as a black hat Hassid in the eyes of his gentile in-laws, the reality of the landscape of American Jewry today is much different than the schmaltz we are fed by the movies. The USC Casden Institute is delighted to present a volume that explores and celebrates the trials and achievements of the Sephardic and Mizrahi communities of America. I owe a special thanks to Dr. Saba Soomekh for her tremendous work as guest-editor and to the Tarica and Amado families for their dedication to the advancement of Sephardic Studies as an academic field and to the steadfast friendship they have shown the USC Casden Institute over the years. May we grow from strength to strength “Mashallah”!

Steven J. Ross, Myron and Marian Casden Director
The theme of longing and belonging—making yourself at home in a new country while yearning for and holding onto the memories of your place of birth—is present in immigrant communities throughout the world. This is especially true among Diaspora Jews, who have a spiritual longing for Israel. In Psalm 137, Jews declare, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.” Yet Diaspora Jews have an additional longing for their place of birth—their country outside of the spiritual homeland of Israel.

Since the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, Jews have lived all over the world. Sephardic Jews developed communities on the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) around 1000 CE, creating their community’s distinct identity and Judeo-Spanish language, called Ladino. With the Alhambra Decree and the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition in the late fifteenth century, many Sephardic Jews escaped Europe and made their home in what was then the Ottoman Empire (the Middle East, North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Balkans). These Jewish communities practice Sephardic customs, laws, and liturgy imparted to them by the Iberian Jewish exiles over the last few centuries. As I am writing this introduction today, it is all over the news that Spain and Portugal are offering Sephardic Jews dual citizenship in order to make amends for the Inquisition. It is estimated that approximately 3.5 million Jews could potentially apply for Spanish and Portuguese passports—proving it is never too late to right your wrongs, even if it is five hundred years later.

Although often confused with Sephardic Jews (because they share many similar religious customs), Mizrahi Jews come from Middle Eastern ancestry; they do not trace their lineage to the Iberian Peninsula. The earliest Mizrahi
communities date from Late Antiquity, and the oldest and largest of these communities comes from modern-day Iran (Persia), Iraq (Babylonia), and Yemen. With the establishment of the State of Israel and the subsequent 1948 Arab-Israeli War, most Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews were either expelled by their Arab rulers or chose to leave. Most live in Israel or the United States. The mass migration of Iranian Jews from Iran occurred with the 1979 Islamic Revolution, during which a majority of Iranian Jews settled in Southern California or New York.

Although the first Jews who settled in America in the mid-seventeenth century were of Sephardic ancestry, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that large-scale immigration of Jews to America occurred, most of whom were of Ashkenazi descent. Sephardic ascendancy faded, and Ashkenazi customs and practices became, and still are, the dominant Jewish tradition in America. Unfortunately, Sephardi and Mizrahi history, customs, and traditions were often absent from portrayals of American Jewry. American Jewish cuisine, art, literature, and the study and portrayal of American Jewry in academia, movies, and television were from an Ashkenazi perspective. Matzo ball soup, gefilte fish, and the Yiddish language were just as foreign to the Sephardi/Mizrahi Jew as they were to the non-Jew in America. As Elaine Lindheim, whose interview appears in “The Maurice Amado Foundation” in this volume, stated, “We are Sephardic . . . we came from the olive oil rather than chicken fat parts of the world.”

As a college and graduate student in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, I do not remember taking a Jewish Studies course in which Sephardic/Mizrahi traditions, history, and culture were discussed; they were always a side note in our readings. The courses that focused on the Jewish community in the United States emphasized the Ashkenazi community. Any course looking at Jewish history mainly focused on Ashkenazi history. We learned about the shtetls of Poland, but we never learned about the mahallehs of Tehran or the mellahs of Casablanca.

This Annual fills the gap within the America Jewish narrative by focusing on the Sephardic and Mizrahi experience in America. Sephardic and Mizrahi Studies is no longer an afterthought in academia, thanks to organizations such as the Maurice Amado Foundation, which has supported the study of Sephardic Jewish history, culture, and heritage over the past half century. The Foundation was among the first to recognize the significance of supporting Sephardic Jewish scholarship and education. I was lucky to conduct an interview with Elaine Lindheim, one of the directors of the Foundation, and Sam Tarica, former president and adviser, in order to discuss the Foundation’s
When reaching out to our contributors for this volume, we simply asked them to write about any aspect of Sephardic and Mizrahi life in America. Our contributors took many different approaches to their chapters. Some took an ethnographic approach, such as scholar Molly FitzMorris, whose article profiles three women, all native speakers of Judeo-Spanish, or Ladino, currently living in or near Seattle, Washington. FitzMorris's interviews and surveys demonstrate that speakers' proficiency in a language and their perceived proficiency do not always correlate.

Scholar Bryan Kirschen writes about the sociolinguistic history and diglossia of the Sephardim in the United States. He examines periodicals based in Los Angeles and New York City in order to describe the internal structure of these cities' Sephardic communities, inter-city correspondence, and problems the Sephardim faced due to linguistic expectations of assimilation and acculturation into the greater multilingual landscape of the United States.

Other contributors explore the meaning of Sephardi and Mizrahi identity in America. Joyce Zonana reflects on what it means to have an Arab Jewish identity through her own personal story while examining Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff's neglected 1951 Egyptian Jewish American autobiographical novel Jacob's Ladder. Devin E. Naar refutes the idea that a century ago, Ladino-speaking Jews in the United States automatically described themselves as "Sephardim"; he writes that the term "Sephardi," as a self-imposed, collective, "ethnic" designation, had to be learned and naturalized, and its parameters defined and negotiated in the new context of the United States and in conversation with discussions about Sephardic identity around the world. Scholar Aviva Ben-Ur examines Sephardi/Ashkenazi tensions beginning in late-seventeenth-century America and the problem of co-ethnic recognition failure. She writes that Jewish tradition prescribes that Jews rescue each other from affliction, yet when the factor of physical remoteness between two communities was eliminated (as it was in America), these time-honored values frequently dissipated.

We are excited to include essays from writers discussing their own personal stories of being a Mizrahi or Sephardi Jew in America. David Suissa illuminates his memories of Casablanca and the beauty of the Arab melodies that infiltrated and influenced the Moroccan synagogues. He writes, "Arab melodies were not written by people shivering in a Polish winter. They were written by romantics who saw the eternity of the sand . . . and dreamed." Suissa discusses the Jewish idea of exile, describing the double exile he feels in America:
exile from his childhood memories of Morocco and the biblical exile. Yet he writes that, ironically, it is in the pluralistic landscape of America, where unlike his ancestors in Morocco, he is not dealing with antisemitism, that his Jewish identity has been strengthened.

Writer Gina Nahai tells us the story of her sassy and independent grandmother in Iran and juxtaposes it with the realities of Iranian Jews escaping to Los Angeles. Just as Aviva Ben-Ur discusses in her essay, Nahai reflects on the tensions between the Iranian and Ashkenazi communities in Los Angeles and the importance of Mizrahi Jews holding on to their identity and culture while living in America.

As a way of preserving Iranian identity, architect and art gallery owner Shulamit Nazarian’s essay discusses Iranian Jewish art today and the cultural legacy it preserves and passes down. Nazarian provides an honest and raw narrative of how her life in Iran, her divorce in Los Angeles, and her journey as a newly single Iranian Jewish woman led her to find her independence and her voice, giving her the strength to turn her passion for art, architecture, and design into a successful gallery, Shulamit Gallery, in Venice, California. The purpose of her gallery is to provide a venue where she can expose people to contemporary Iranian, Israeli, and Middle Eastern culture, engaging locals through interdisciplinary exhibitions and programming that features artwork by emerging and established artists. A major theme in her artists’ work is the exploration of hybrid and multilayered identities.

Finally, Rabbi Daniel Bouskila provides a personal meditation on Sephardic Judaism. As a pulpit rabbi for seventeen years and as the International Director of the Sephardic Educational Center in Los Angeles, Bouskila describes the Sephardic traditional home he was raised in as being without the denominational terms American Judaism ascribes to. Denominational differences (Ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform) did not exist within the Sephardic and Mizrahi traditions. Thus, Bouskila writes, his family celebrations were full of Judeo-Arabic poetry and prayers, traditions, and culinary magic, and void of divisive denominational affiliations. Bouskila laments that nondenominational Sephardic Judaism in America has been influenced by Lithuanian Orthodoxy, which is alien to classic Sephardic tradition, believing it “not religious enough.” Thus, he started a Sephardic rabbinical program that would revive the classic Sephardic tradition with the goal of educating and training rabbinical leaders who will revive the authentic voice of Sephardic Judaism in communities all over the world.
The dominance of Ashkenazi denominational Judaism is seen among Iranian Jews in Los Angeles who have appropriated the different forms of Judaism available to them in the pluralistic American Jewish landscape. Only in America would you see an Iranian Jew stepping into a Chabad synagogue, dressed like a Lubavitch Jew from Eastern Europe. As a scholar who writes about the Iranian Jewish American community, I have seen how different denominational ties have caused discord in the community. Iranian Jews describe themselves as practicing “traditional” Judaism in Iran, and now within the same family, someone only eats Glatt Kosher while another sends her child to a Reform Jewish Day school. This is the inevitable part of being a Jew in America. No longer are Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews dealing with antisemitism and second-class citizenship of their homeland, but now they must cope with how to preserve and navigate their culture, language, history, and heritage of their traditions while dealing with assimilation—not only into a dominant American society, but into a dominant Ashkenazi society.

I am grateful to Bruce Zuckerman, the former Director of the Casden Institute; Steve Ross, the current Director of the Casden Institute; and Lisa Ansell, the Casden Institute’s Associate Director, for recognizing the significance of the Sephardic and Mizrahi community in America and dedicating this volume to their story. Bruce, you have worked tirelessly for the Casden Institute and we are so grateful for your guidance and vision. The legacy you leave is tremendous and the future achievements of the Institute are a result of your devotion dedication over the past ten years. Steve and Lisa, I extend my heartfelt gratitude for your counseling, mentoring, and leadership. You are a wealth of knowledge and full of amazing ideas. I am honored and humbled to be working with such amazing scholars as the three of you and I am grateful for the opportunity to work on such an important volume. May we continue to work together on such novel and groundbreaking projects in the future! Finally, I would like to thank Alan Casden, whose generosity has made it possible to have these significant book series and whose vision and commitment to Jewish life in America created the Institute. It is due to Alan’s generosity and commitment to the advancement of Jewish Studies at USC that makes such novel scholarship possible.

In closing, I would like to dedicate this volume to Mark Tarica, Sam Tarica and to their families. Your steadfast friendship and support of our initiatives and ideas over the years have given us the confidence and resources to develop one of the premier institutes of Jewish scholarship in Los Angeles. We are eternally grateful for the guidance and wisdom you have shown us throughout
this journey. You embody the very best of the Sephardic tradition upon which this volume is based as did Louis and Betty Angel of blessed memory to whom this volume is dedicated as well.
One of the most important American foundations that has supported the study of Sephardic Jewish history, culture, and heritage over the past half century is the Maurice Amado Foundation. The Foundation was established in 1961 and has been directed by Maurice Amado’s family since Mr. Amado’s death in 1968. For several decades, the main goals of the Foundation were to support organizations that serve the Sephardic Jewish community, promote knowledge of Sephardic Jewish culture and heritage, and expand knowledge of the contributions of Sephardic Jews to Jewish life.

The Foundation was among the first to recognize the significance of supporting Sephardic Jewish scholarship and education. In 1989, the Foundation provided an endowment to the University of California, Los Angeles, to establish a chair in Sephardic Studies and to support programming in Sephardic Studies. Initially UCLA hosted a series of distinguished and diverse scholars to serve as Visiting Maurice Amado Professors for one quarter each year. Since 2008, the Maurice Amado Program in Sephardic Studies at UCLA has been directed and led by Professor Sarah Abrevaya Stein, the Maurice Amado Chair in Sephardic Studies. The Maurice Amado Program in Sephardic Studies at
UCLA offers students at the undergraduate and graduate level the rare opportunity to focus intensively on the study of Sephardic history and culture. It also hosts lectures, workshops, and symposia open to the academic and wider Los Angeles community that cultivate and stimulate this field and situate UCLA as one of its principal hubs. In addition, the Foundation has supported international scholarship, building on the solid research and teaching program developed over the course of a decade and a half of Maurice Amado Lectures and more recently by the Maurice Amado Chair.

The Maurice Amado Foundation supports the study of Sephardic Jewish history and culture at other universities, including the Maurice Amado Foundation Lectures at California State University, Northridge, where, according to Jennifer Thompson, CSUN’s Maurice Amado Assistant Professor of Applied Jewish Ethics and Civic Engagement, “The purpose of the Maurice Amado lecture is to help people think about issues that affect their daily lives using the resources of Jewish ethics.” The Foundation has also been a longtime supporter of the University of Southern California’s Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life as well as providing grants for the USC School of Dentistry (where Foundation Board members Sam and Mark Tarica attended dental school).

The Maurice Amado Foundation also has sponsored cultural exhibitions, including “Romance & Ritual: Celebrating the Jewish Wedding” at The Skirball Cultural Center and Museum in Los Angeles and “Jewish Life in the American West: Generation to Generation” at the Autry National Center, a museum in Los Angeles. Other significant Sephardic educational and cultural activities supported by the Foundation include a Sephardic curriculum project with Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, Sephardic cultural programs at the Houston, Texas Jewish Community Center, a Sephardic apartment at the Lower Eastside Tenement Museum in New York City, and support for students in Sephardic Studies to participate in programs of the Association of Jewish Studies.

On September 12, 2014, I sat down with Elaine Lindheim, one of the directors of the Foundation, and Sam Tarica, former president and advisor, in order to discuss the Foundation, its history, goals and interests, and to learn a bit about Maurice Amado, the man.

**Saba:** Can you please tell me a little bit about your affiliation with The Maurice Amado Foundation?
Elaine: I am one of the directors of the Maurice Amado Foundation. I was president a while ago. My role as a director is to represent the interest that is most immediately related to me. My mother, Stella Amado Lavis, was also president and one of the directors from the previous generation. Right now the MA Foundation Board consists of lineal descendants of Mr. Amado.

Sam: I am Sam Tarica; I am the current chief financial officer of the Foundation and an advisor and I have been president. I represent my family and my brother; my mother was Regina Amado Tarica. She was a niece of Maurice Amado.

Saba: Did Maurice Amado have any children?

Elaine: No. His wife, Rose Amado, had a son but Maurice never adopted him so Maurice was childless. But his older brother, Raphael, had five children. It is down from that family line that the foundation is drawn. We should point out that we are all related to Maurice.

Saba: Who was Maurice Amado?
Elaine: He was our parents’ uncle; the younger brother of Raphael Amado. He was from Izmir, Turkey. He came to this country in the early 1900s, 1904 perhaps. He came with his brother Raphael and Raphael’s wife Ester, our grandparents, and their two oldest children, who were born in Turkey. The whole family is from Izmir, Turkey. Maurice was fifteen or sixteen at the time he immigrated. His brother Raphael was in the tobacco business. Maurice was primarily an investor. He stayed in America, living for a while with his brother and family in Brooklyn. Raphael traveled back and forth with his tobacco business and was actually stuck in Greece during WWI.

Maurice married Rose Bernstein, who was an American dress designer. She was quite avant-garde for her era to be a businesswoman. She owned a high-end dress shop on Madison Avenue in New York City during the 1940s. They lived in New York and ultimately, by the 1950s, moved to Los Angeles. While he was still a bachelor, Maurice was present at the time that Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel was built on Santa Barbara Avenue in the southern part of Los Angeles. It was the middle of the Depression but his brother Raphael was quite active in financing and finding people to finance the community and Maurice was present at that point.

We remember his wife Rose as a Christian Scientist. She died when I was sixteen and Maurice died when I was twenty-five. Maurice and Rose lived on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. They had a house that is still there and Maurice took great pride in his garden. Every time you went to see him he would take you to his garden. He also read a great deal and enjoyed discussing philosophy and current events.

Sam: Mark (Sam’s brother) and I were young and he didn’t like kids to be noisy. He was not a kid person. He did enjoy celebrating the Jewish holidays at the homes of his nieces and nephews and was especially fond of the special Sephardic foods that were associated with each festival.

Elaine: His foundation was incorporated in 1961. The original directors included his attorney and a close friend as well as his nephews Richard and Milton Amado. Maurice died in 1968.

Saba: Maurice was married to a woman who wasn’t Jewish, let alone, a Sephardic Jew. He was coming to your parents’ homes to eat Sephardic food. What about being Sephardic was important to him?
Elaine: I don’t know. Why was Maurice attracted to the Sephardic heritage? I would say the Sephardic heritage more than Sephardic rituals... Part of it was because he was a part of this family. I think it travels through the family. It was important that our grandparents continued on with the religion and the culture. Ester (our grandmother and Maurice’s sister-in-law) taught her daughters how to observe the holidays and prepare the foods. Another factor was his relationship with Rabbi Jacob Ott, at the Sephardic Temple. The two bonded when Rabbi Ott recognized that Maurice was someone who could be philanthropic and also was very intelligent and a good reader.

Sam: Near the end of his life he became more philanthropic in his thinking. He was influenced by the people around him. I don't recall Uncle Maurice being active in Jewish things, such as in the community and in the synagogue, before he was befriended by Rabbi Ott.

Elaine: Rabbi Jacob Ott was from Chicago. He was the rabbi for thirty-five years (at the Sephardic Temple). He was quite involved in the outside world and Zionist causes. He managed to give people at the synagogue a real sense of what was special about being Sephardic. He would write and talk about it.

Sam: Maurice was a great investor. He continued his investment interest throughout his life. He would always look at “how the market did today.” People would ask him for investment advice.

Elaine: If you look back in the history of philanthropy, this foundation was created at a time when a lot of family foundations were founded. People were told it was a good tax strategy. Maurice did very little granting of his own out of it while he was alive. But it did say in the papers that it was to be for Sephardic causes. He did establish other things, outside of the Foundation. At the Sephardic Temple there is a scholarship fund and a merit award fund, both of which honor young people. And he funded a building at Technion University in Israel.

Maurice made Richard and Milton (his nephews) Foundation trustees before he died. The brothers lived here and they were close to him. One was an attorney and the other was in finance. And when Maurice died, they were left with this responsibility. They brought their older sister Lucy Amado Touriel, onto the Board. And then she got ill and Richard died. And Milton was left alone so he brought in my mother. Ultimately, the nine children of Maurice’s nieces and nephews—our generation of cousins—were brought onto the
Foundation Board. That is the initial story. Everything else that has happened has been done in his name but not due to any particular mandate from him.

Saba: The Foundation has evolved philanthropically from something that was specifically focused on the Sephardic Temple to a broader sense of Sephardic Jewish philanthropy.

Elaine: At one point, in the Foundation documents, there was a possibility that the Sephardic Temple would be the sole beneficiary of the Foundation.

Saba: Do you think that was because of your generation coming in?

Elaine: No, it was the generation prior to us. The Temple was a beneficiary of the money from our parents’ generation. The Sephardic Temple was the primary focus of the giving when the nephews were living.

Saba: How does Sephardic history and culture influence your own personal life?

Sam: My Sephardic culture and experience is primarily familial. It comes from what we ate, family experiences, and the sense of being the other. Everybody else would talk about their Ashkenazi background and experience. My brother and I, we came from a different heritage and background that as time has gone by—this heritage has become more important, not so much personally but in the Jewish community in Los Angeles. The term “Sephardic” has risen with the influx of Israeli and Persian communities. I still am latched to the concept that we are Sephardic, that we came from the olive oil rather than chicken fat parts of the world.

Elaine: I identify as Sephardic, not just Jewish, and a lot of it comes from the Foundation and being involved with its efforts. I say I am Sephardic because our Temple doesn’t associate with any particular movement.

I have been involved with the Sephardic Temple for quite a while. I am interested in Sephardic history and culture. More than thirty years ago, the Temple Sisterhood published a cookbook of Sephardic recipes. These were mainly from the Ottoman Jews from Turkey and Greece. The Sisterhood now includes a whole new younger group of members because our congregation has expanded so broadly culturally. Now we have members originating from Egypt, Persian, Morocco, and Cuba. I said I would be interested in putting together a new edition of the cookbook. The cookbook committee consists of
twenty women who get together at lunch, share recipes and learn about each others’ family stories.

My daughter is married to a Syrian Jew and his customs are different than ours. He was raised in a more observant family so it is interesting to me to see what they do and learn about their traditions and culture.

Our generation, as Sam said, felt marginalized. We were all American born but still felt marginalized. Maurice and his brother Raphael were determined to speak English and be modern. They both probably went to Alliance Israélite Universelle schools in Turkey. I was told Maurice would go to New York to hear Stephen S. Wise when he was preaching to listen to him speaking in English. Raphael made sure that all five of his children, including his three daughters, were college graduates. Their degree of literacy and education may differentiate them somewhat from other Sephardic families that came at the time. That led Maurice to become interested in education. That is why he established scholarships and education and merit awards. That thread has followed through generations with educational projects being something that people have looked to. There is a strong emphasis on education and merit. There are some minor gifts to Israel but it is not a Zionist foundation.

**Saba:** The foundation has given a lot of grants to universities, museums, and libraries. Is there a grant that you have given that spoke out to you, something that you read and said I really want to support this?

**Sam:** Certainly more in the past than in the present, we were very collaborative. There was enough money to do many things based on the way we have granted. We have been able to have many foci. That’s very positive.

**Elaine:** If you ask me which one I was most excited about, I think going back to my parents’ generation, I can speak for my mother and my two aunts. They were very engaged with the grants to the Temple and the Los Angeles Jewish Home for the Aging in support of the Alzheimer’s Unit. Those grants were very important to them. For our generation, I get most excited about Sephardic studies and the chair of Sephardic studies at UCLA. Our grants to Hebrew Union College and the Skirball Museum make us very excited. We have given funding towards a gallery at The Skirball Museum.

**Sam:** That also was exciting (Skirball). It is a wonderful, we see the positive of it, and that’s what makes it exciting.
Elaine: To see what UCLA and The Center for Jewish Studies has done. Now Mark Kligman, who coordinated the Sephardic curriculum development project for HUC, has joined the faculty at UCLA.

Sam: We have done a lot of museums and a lot of education.

Saba: Do you think education is the best route to teach Sephardic history and culture?

Elaine: I think it is everything—all of the above. We are all products of public schools and didn’t feel included. We went to Jewish Sunday schools; the feeling of our group was that we were marginalized. As Foundation members thinking about how to increase knowledge about Sephardic Judaism, we began by thinking that we should do things for K–12 religious schools. As we explored what was available and what strategies worked, we learned about the importance of the academy and how there has to be serious scholarship at the university level first and everything else will spin off this work and trickle down. You can’t ask a teacher in a religious school or day school to teach something that they are not familiar with or don’t feel comfortable about. Also having multiple representations, museum and other places is where learning also happens.

Sam: Things have changed in the last forty years. When we began, Sephardic studies didn’t exist in any of the curriculums. It certainly didn’t as we were growing up. The surveys we did showed us that it didn’t exist. I think as a result of our focus we helped move it along.

Elaine: Something else we wanted to focus on and promote was the integration of the Sephardic story into the general Jewish story. The Sephardic culture is alive and thriving and should be integrated and looked at.

Saba: Are you worried that Sephardic culture will slowly disappear?

Elaine: Ladino is a dead language. It is taught and used for scholarship. None of us were raised speaking the language. Our parents were the last generation of native Ladino speakers.

Sam: I don’t think it is possible to revive it. If we decided to make it a focus or initiative, we won’t have the impact to make it happen.

Elaine: There are not many native speakers who speak it who are still alive. It is good that Ladino has a unique connection to Medieval Spanish making
non-Jews interested in working on it. At least there is enough reason to make it a subject of study, from the academy perspective; it is going to be documented.

_Saba:_ Is the Foundation concerned that living in a Jewish pluralistic environment that Sephardic and Ashkenazi culture is going to morph together and there won’t be a pride and distinction with Sephardic culture and heritage?

_Sam:_ Only one of my children has married a Jew, and that is my son who has married another Jewish man. We will be lucky if the Judaism gets translated and the whole concept of being Jewish goes down the line. There are so many things to worry about in life. I am more concerned about being Jewish.

_Elaine:_ I think in regards to what influence the Foundation can have, because it is family focused, I can’t predict where it will be. It is important to involve our children philanthropically and have their interests represented.

_Saba:_ How have you raised your children or grandchildren with the Sephardic culture?

_Elaine:_ My daughter married a Syrian Jew and my granddaughter is becoming bicultural like we were. She is going to an Ashkenazi religious school and experiencing Sephardic culture at home. My son married a non-Jew and has gotten himself involved in the Sephardic Temple. He’s very traditional in that sense. My daughter loves Sephardic food but my son doesn’t like any of it. Beyond that, whatever is going to happen will happen. Sam and I came from homes that were strictly Sephardic. Sam is the only one married to a Sephardic Jew. I see among my daughter’s generation of Amado cousins, there is an interest to know about this. Even the children of intermarriages, who will be millennial descendants, are interested in coming to the cultural things. In any family, the first generation of children have one hundred percent of what their parents are interested in, and then it gets filtered down . . . We are getting down to the low percentages; we are four and five generations into this.

_Sam:_ I hope that we can have some Jewish interest with the Foundation going forward. I hope that our children will take some identity if through nothing else, the food. It is a very powerful identifying marker. I get very proud when I go to the Skirball (Museum). We do good things, certainly for me, we are not out for recognition, and we’re not out to be recognized. We are very happy to be involved and help and go on our merry way. I don’t know that my kids even now, when we tell them we are coming into a Foundation granting cycle, we
want your input/ ideas . . . is there an organization that you’re interested in? My son is interested, my older daughter is having children and not that interested. My younger daughter, I hope, will continue the identity but I don’t know if she will have interest in the Foundation going further. I just hope that we can find good fulfilling projects.

Elaine: What project excites me? I am an advisory board member for The Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies at UCLA and I have been for awhile. I am very pleased with the work we have done at UCLA. I am very happy when I hear Prof. Sarah Stein (the Maurice Amado Chair in Sephardic Studies) talk or when I read what she is writing. She personifies for me how excited we are that she is there, working with students and colleagues around the world to document and tell the Sephardic story.

One final thought. I often wonder what Uncle Maurice would think if he were able to see what he started when he decided to create a foundation that is now more than fifty years old. Because Maurice wanted his foundation to exist in perpetuity, the governance of his foundation will soon be in the hands of family members who never knew him. I am confident the next generations will be responsible stewards of this remarkable legacy.

Saba: Thank you both for your time and for the excellent programs and academic institutions that The Maurice Amado Foundations supports.
Language Mixing in Seattle Ladino: Influence or Interference?

by Molly FitzMorris

INTRODUCTION

This article profiles three women, all native speakers of Judeo-Spanish, or Ladino, currently living in or near Seattle, Washington. A brief analysis of the information provided by these women in interviews and surveys demonstrates that speakers’ proficiency in a language and their perceived proficiency do not always correlate. The cases of these three women in particular suggest that perceived proficiency may, in fact, relate more directly to the speaker’s linguistic repertoire than it does to actual performance or demonstrated proficiency. It appears that some languages may be perceived as influencing Ladino, while others are seen as interfering.

LADINO FROM SEFARAD TO SEATTLE

Ladino is a mixed Sephardic Jewish language that includes elements from Turkish, Hebrew, French, Greek, and Arabic, among other languages. Though scholars debate whether the Jews in Spain were already speaking a distinct Spanish-based language before the Inquisition, Ladino is essentially a result of the expulsion of these Jews from Spain, or Sefarad, in 1492. Tens of thousands of these emigrants fled to the Ottoman Empire, where they maintained the language for more than four centuries.

Ladino arrived in Seattle around the turn of the twentieth century, as the Ottoman Empire began to crumble. The first Sephardic settlers came from the island of Marmara in 1902 or 1903 (Cone, Droker, and Williams 60; Moriwaki),
and were followed shortly thereafter by the first Rhodesli Sephardic settler in 1904 (Papo 286; Cone, Droker, and Williams 61–62; Adatto 58; Moriwaki). As Sephardic immigration from both Turkey and Rhodes increased, the Seattle Sephardic community split into two groups: the “Turks” and the “Rhodeslis” (Umphrey and Adatto 256). Quite remarkably, Seattle continues to maintain two Sephardic congregations one hundred years later, the “Turkish” Sephardic Bikur Holim Congregation, and the “Rhodesli” Congregation Ezra Bessaroth.

Presently in Seattle, there is a group of Ladino speakers who get together once a week to practice the language. This group has gained considerable recognition in the past year or so in Seattle, and is known publicly as the “Ladineros.” The data used for this article were obtained in a sociolinguistic study of the Ladineros conducted in late 2013 and early 2014. Using an interview in Ladino and a survey in English, I investigated not only the speakers’ demonstrated proficiency in Ladino, but also their ideas and evaluations about the language and their proficiency in the language.

THE SPEAKERS
The three women profiled in this article, all Ladineras, have spent most of their lives in or in close proximity to the city of Seattle. It is important to note, however, that although all three women are native speakers of Ladino, they grew up in extremely different speech communities. Only one of the women is, in fact, a native speaker of a Seattle variety of Ladino, while the other two women learned Rhodesli varieties of Ladino on two different continents abroad before moving to Seattle.

The first speaker is Victoria, who was interviewed with her husband but did not take the survey. Victoria was born on the island of Rhodes in 1932 and spent the first seven years of her life there. At the time, Rhodes was an Italian territory, but according to Victoria, Ladino was spoken within the Sephardic community. Victoria and her family moved to Tangier, Morocco in 1939 because it offered more refuge from the War than did Rhodes, whose Jewish population was eventually decimated. In Morocco, Victoria was educated in Castilian Spanish. When she was fourteen, Victoria’s family moved to Seattle, where she was placed in seventh grade instead of ninth merely because she did not speak English. Victoria later married a Sephardic man who was a passive bilingual, meaning he could understand but not speak Ladino. Upon meeting
Victoria’s family, her husband decided to re-learn Ladino in order to communicate with his new in-laws.

The second speaker is Marie, who was interviewed and surveyed. Marie was born in 1937 in the city of Elizabethville in what was then the Belgian Congo. There was a large Sephardic community of Rhodesli origin in this city at the time, and Ladino was widely spoken among the members of the community. Marie confirmed, however, that French was the majority language and the language in which she was educated. Marie’s family moved to Seattle when she was eleven, and she immediately began to take English courses with her father. Although she began school a couple of grades behind the other children her age, Marie learned English very quickly and was moved to the proper grade in just a few months. Marie married an Ashkenazi man from New York who does not speak or understand Ladino.

The third speaker is Rose, who was interviewed individually and surveyed. Rose was born in Seattle in 1929 and is the oldest of four children. Her parents were both born in present-day Turkey. Rose’s status as the oldest child is relevant to her language use, since the oldest child of immigrants often has little to no exposure to the majority language until he or she begins school. Younger siblings, in contrast, are often exposed to the majority language by their older siblings, leading the majority language to become the language spoken among the children. For this reason, older siblings tend to have a higher proficiency in the minority language than do younger siblings.

Rose indicated in the interview that her first language was, unsurprisingly, Ladino. In fact, she said that when she entered school at the age of five, she spoke English with a Ladino accent, and even pronounced the word “Seattle” with an accent:


Rose’s status as the oldest child most likely contributed to her proficiency in Ladino, but there is another unique factor in Rose’s case that came up in the interview.

When I asked her if she spoke Ladino as a child, Rose told me yes, but that now, “no kedaron djente kon ken avlar” (“there’s no one left to talk to”), and then she told me that she had traveled to Israel twenty-seven times. Although Rose did not describe all of the trips in detail, she suggested that the trips were extended visits, providing this anecdote to illustrate the acclimation she underwent:

Kuando me iva a Israel, avlava kon las tias, tios, primas en ladino. Solo los chikos avlavan en inglez. Una vez fui a la banka kon el chiko de mi primo, y le dishe, “Kualo dize aki?” There was a big sign, and he said, “Doda Rose, it’s in English!”

When I went to Israel, I spoke to my aunts, uncles, cousins in Ladino. Only the kids spoke English. One time I went to the bank with my cousin’s son, and I said to him, “What does it say here?” There was a big sign, and he said, “Aunt Rose, it’s in English!”

After this anecdote, Rose told me that during this particular trip, she had already spent a month in Israel, and joked that she had forgotten her English during this month because she had been speaking virtually exclusively in Ladino. Although forgetting one’s native language would take far, far longer than a single month, this anecdote is telling in that it suggests that Rose experienced a high level of immersion in Ladino each time she traveled to Israel. Although many of the other Ladineros talked about trips to Israel, no one other than Rose reported having been more than just a few times. It appears that none of the other Ladineros had the opportunity to practice their Ladino by using it almost exclusively for an extended period of time.

In contrast to Victoria and Marie, who were immigrants themselves, Rose was born to immigrant parents in the United States. It is Rose’s American-born generation that is at the center of a linguistic phenomenon called language shift. David Crystal describes language shift as the change in the language used by a particular speech community as a result of contact with a more dominant language. Typically, but not always, this shift occurs over the course of two generations, where the older generation speaks the minority language more, but
the younger generation relies more heavily on the majority language (78–79). In a similar theory of minority language loss, Silvina Montrul concludes that learning and speaking a second language well from early in life can negatively affect a speaker’s first language, and that as a speaker improves in one language, he or she may start to decline in the other (207). In his 2012 study on Istanbul Judeo-Spanish, Rey Romero points out that linguistic change can sometimes look like mistakes or inconsistencies in speech. It is clear that each of these scholars’ theories relates to the current situation in the Seattle Ladino speech community, which is undergoing language change in the form of language shift. This shift, which is nearing its completion as the oldest current generation of Sephardic Jews in Seattle ages, has led to considerable language loss among the individual speakers.

Every one of the speakers whom I interviewed produced grammatical constructions that indicated some level of language loss. During the interviews, there were many agreement errors, both subject-verb and for number and gender in adjectives. Another characteristic of the Ladino that is spoken today is that the subjunctive is almost never used. Phrases like “No kreo ke vamos a . . .”3 were used commonly by the speakers that I interviewed. Crystal notes that “there is usually a dramatic increase in the amount of code-switching [in languages in shift], with the threatened language incorporating features from the contact language(s)” (22). This suggests that American Ladino speakers will demonstrate quite a bit of interference from English in their speech. T. K. Harris observed that there was code-switching in the speech of all of her informants, but she says that the type of code-switching she noticed, the type also referenced by Crystal, was more like the code-shifting that C. Silva-Corvalán defined. Code-switching, a commonly studied phenomenon, is the unmarked alternation between two languages by a speaker who is proficient in both languages. Code-shifting, in contrast, is a phenomenon in which a bilingual who speaks one language more proficiently than the other is forced to use his or her less dominant language and, because of this, incorporates elements of the stronger language into his or her speech. Code-switching was not common among the Ladineros, but code-shifting was observed in every speaker who was interviewed, with the majority of the shifts, as Crystal predicts, between Ladino and English. I will focus on these two types of language mixing and the speakers’ responses to their own language mixing below.
LANGUAGE MIXING AND LINGUISTIC SECURITY

Each of the women exhibited interference from at least one other language in their Ladino speech, suggesting a certain level of language loss since childhood. For Victoria, the interference came from both English and Castilian Spanish. For example, while talking about her family, Victoria said “mi uncle,” and was immediately corrected by her husband. Victoria repeated her husband’s correction, “mi tio,” and continued speaking. Though Victoria often uttered Castilian Spanish words like “ahora” or “lengua,” without seeming to notice, there were times when she clearly recognized the Spanish interference in her Ladino. An example of this was when I asked her how to say “neighborhood” in Ladino. At first, Victoria replied that she did not know, and when I offered that the word was “barrio” in Spanish in an attempt to remind her of its Ladino equivalent, Victoria replied that it was “barrio” in Ladino too. But after confirming and using this word in her response to an interview question, Victoria admitted, “No se si esto avlando ladino o espanyol” (“I don’t know if I’m speaking Ladino or Spanish”). This confession suggests that Victoria was conscious of the mix of Spanish and Ladino in her speech. Also interesting was Victoria’s variation between the Spanish word “judío” and the Ladino “djudio.” The first word, the Castilian Spanish word for “Jews,” is pronounced [huðiø], where the first consonant is pronounced like an h in English, the second consonant is pronounced like the th in “the” and the stress falls on the second-to-last syllable. Its Ladino equivalent is pronounced [dʒudiˈo] by most speakers in Seattle, where the first consonant is pronounced like the g in “gym,” the second consonant is pronounced like an English d and the stress falls on the last syllable. It is surprising that Victoria would vary in her usage of these two words, especially because Ladino is so closely tied to Sephardic Jewish identity.

Marie demonstrated interference from both English and French in her Ladino speech. In response to my question about her date and place of birth, Marie replied:

Yo nasi en un pais de Afrika, Elisabethville, la . . . city . . . sivdad,
Élisabethville, Belgian Congo, Congo Belge. En français, c’est Congo Belge. Et je suis née à Élisabethville, mille neuf cents trente-sept, nineteen thirty-seven, juillet dix-huit, July eighteenth.

This particular quote is an example of code-shifting, where Marie shifts from Ladino to both French and English, suggesting that she feels more proficient in both of these languages than she does in Ladino. It is telling that after struggling with the Ladino word “sivdad,” Marie gives the rest of the response
in English and French, using no additional Ladino words. In fact, as in the quote above, Marie replied with entire sentences in French to some of my later interview questions, which were asked in Ladino. For example, when I asked which language Marie spoke with her parents when she was a child, she replied, “Nous parlons entre nous dans notre famille, nous parlons en français et ladino (“We [spoke] among ourselves in our family, we [spoke] in French and Ladino”). We always spoke both languages,” but then added a Ladino addendum: “La primera lingua de kasa era ladino (“The first language at home was Ladino”), very much so.”

A major challenge for the study of Ladino, a mixed language, is that it is often very difficult to distinguish between interference from another language and borrowed vocabulary that has been integrated into the speaker’s dialect of Ladino. For example, in a bit of interesting metalinguistic commentary, or ideas and evaluations about her own language use, during the interview, Marie observed, “Kuando yo avlo aki kon los Ladineros i partikularmente kon el Hazzan, ay munchos biervos ke son en fransez” (“When I speak here with the Ladineros and particularly with the Hazzan [the cantor who is also the leader of the Ladineros], there are a lot of words that are in French”). This could mean that Marie recognizes the French interference in her Ladino speech, or it could mean that she just perceives her Ladino as having a lot of French influence. Many dialects of Ladino display considerable influence from French thanks to the Alliance Israélite Universelle, a French organization that established schools throughout the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century. Though the amount of French influence varies from dialect to dialect, most Ladino words of French origin have been either Hispanified with the addition of Spanish suffix, for example, or at least adapted to fit the phonology of Ladino. This means that entire sentences in standard French should not be considered Ladino, but rather instances of code-switching or code-shifting, depending on the circumstances.

In addition to the examples cited above, Marie’s speech also contained many instances of code-shifting between English and Ladino, with no French influence. At the end of the interview, for example, while commenting about the future of Ladino, Marie asked, “Ke es la vida si no tienes . . . what’s the word for ‘hope’? I’m starting to forget [Ladino].”8 Other examples include, “Keria venir a Amerika pero his, su, brother . . . hermano i hermana estavan aki” (“He wanted to come to America but his, his, brother . . . brother and sister were here”), “La chikez was a joy” (“[My] childhood was a joy”), and “Yo esto
rogando al Dio ke la lingua va . . . regenerate” (“I’m praying to God that the language is going to . . . regenerate”).

Compared to the other Ladineros, Marie indicated very high linguistic security. In response to the survey statement, “I am a native Ladino speaker,” Marie responded with a four on a scale where one indicated “strongly disagree” and five indicated “strongly agree.” For the statements “I can communicate effectively in Ladino,” “I can read and understand Ladino well,” and “I speak Ladino as well as my parents did,” Marie wrote in “4½,” indicating that she was somewhere between “agree” and “strongly agree.” All of these responses suggest that Marie perceives her proficiency in Ladino to be quite high, significantly higher than the Ladineros’ average, even though she did not demonstrate a lower degree of language loss than most of the group members who were interviewed.

In contrast to the other two women, Rose only demonstrated interference from English in her Ladino speech, but much of this interference came in the form of connectors and filler words, often the first word of a sentence. The most common English words I observed in Rose’s speech were “so,” “you know,” “but,” “yes,” and “yeah,” in phrases like, “So ya estavan aki” (“So they were already here”), or, “But esta mujer, lo ke oi, era muy buena” (“But this woman, from what I heard, was very good”). It was very common among all the speakers I interviewed to say the names of cities, countries, and other proper noun place names in English, but, with the exception of one instance in which she said that her mother came from Marmara, “una isla between the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus” (“an island between the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus”), Rose typically did not regularly exhibit this type of code-switching in the interview. In fact, Rose provided the only examples of code-switching that I encountered during the entire investigation. While speaking about her favorite foods during her childhood, Rose told me:

Oh, komidas, my mother was a great cook. Agora, antes teniamos de lenya i kimur estovas and gizavan las komidas kon savor i de alma i korason, you know? And kada viernes, well, first of all, on Thursdays, they would go shopping, and no avia automobil. Era todo kon shopping bags.

Oh, foods, my mother was a great cook. Now, before we had wood stoves, and they cooked the foods with flavor and with heart and soul, you know? And every Friday, well, first of all, on Thursdays, they would go shopping, and there weren’t cars. It was all with shopping bags.
This particular passage can be distinguished from the previous examples of language mixing in that the speech was fluid; there were neither pauses nor hesitations separating the two languages. Rose was not switching to English to fill lexical gaps in her Ladino, but rather speaking in a way that felt natural to her. Rose demonstrated code-switching once again when she said, “Komo de funny name is that?” (“What kind of funny name is that?”).

Though Rose appears to have a high level of proficiency in Ladino compared to many other speakers of Ladino in Seattle, she demonstrates quite a bit of linguistic insecurity, or negative feelings and evaluations regarding her language use. Firstly, Rose's perceived relationship with Ladino is very unclear from her interview and survey responses. In the quote above, in which she talks about going to school not knowing any English, Rose distinguishes herself from the other children in her school by the language she spoke and by the non-native accent she perceived herself as having when she started to speak English. Rose does not, however, continue to distinguish herself from native English speakers today. In fact, in response to the survey statement, “I am a native Ladino speaker,” Rose responded with a three, indicating “neither agree nor disagree.” Rose’s responses suggest that she perceives a strong connection between birth country and native language, an idea that is also evident in the following anecdote she told regarding one of her many trips to Israel:

The last time I was in Israel, I went to the synagogue and [a] man asked, “Is that your mother tongue?” because I was conversing with the members there [in Ladino] and he overheard me, and I said, “No, I’m American.”

Here, Rose suggests that Ladino could not be her native language, or “mother tongue,” because she is American. This is particularly striking when compared with her public school anecdote, when she clearly perceived herself as different from the other children because of her language. In reality, the fact that Rose went to kindergarten speaking Ladino and not English confirms that her first language, or her mother tongue, was Ladino.

In further contrast to Marie's strong and positive survey responses, Rose also replied with a three, indicating “neither agree nor disagree,” to the statements “I can communicate effectively in Ladino” and “I can read and understand Ladino well.” For the statement “I speak Ladino as well as my parents did,” Rose responded with a one, indicating “strongly disagree.” Rose’s linguistic insecurity is also evident in some of the comments she made during the interview, such as, “It may not sound like my Ladino is so good now, but it takes
me a while to get started,” and, “Well, the language is [. . .] not a living language like when I grew up, and, unfortunately, I don’t speak it all that well, maybe in a conversation.” Clearly there is a wide disconnect between Rose’s perceptions and her performance in Ladino, but why?

**INFLUENCE VS. INTERFERENCE?**

There is no doubt that Victoria and Marie both demonstrate interference from other languages when they speak Ladino, but the interference can come from either English (both) or Spanish (Victoria) or French (Marie). It appears, however, that the women evaluate the languages of interference differently, apologizing for interference in English but not noticing or sometimes even freely admitting to interference from Spanish or French. Since any interference in Rose’s speech must come from English, Rose’s relatively low linguistic security may suggest that these speakers see French and Spanish as influencing their Ladino and English as merely interfering with their Ladino.

Victoria, in fact, said something during the interview that suggests that she finds it more acceptable to use Spanish than English while speaking Ladino. When I asked Victoria if she and her husband had traveled to their parents’ countries of origin, she misunderstood me, so I repeated the question in Ladino. Once again, Victoria did not understand, and responded by asking, “Qué quiere decir en español? Dime. Pregúntame” (“What does that mean in Spanish? Tell me. Ask me”). The fact that Victoria asked me to clarify the question in Castilian Spanish instead of in English suggests that she believed using Spanish would be less inappropriate than using English in the context of an interview in Ladino.

It seems that this apparent contrast between influence from French and Spanish and interference from English, then, has the potential to affect the speakers’ linguistic security. It is not the case that Victoria and Marie have an inflated linguistic security, since they speak Ladino as would be expected of multilingual speakers of an endangered minority language, with much influence from their dominant language(s), especially English. It seems, instead, that Rose has an unusually low level of linguistic security, and that her Ladino is actually stronger than average. Rose’s mention of her many trips to Israel shed some light on how she has managed to maintain her Ladino at a higher level of proficiency than the average Seattle speaker, and while this opportunity to
use Ladino almost certainly explains Rose’s proficiency in Ladino, it also raises the question as to how her experiences using Ladino in Israel have contributed to her feelings about her Ladino speech. Unfortunately further questions regarding Rose’s use of Ladino in Israel were not included in this particular investigation, but they could be the starting point for a fascinating future case study on Rose and her linguistic history. Such a case study could contribute to a better understanding of individual variation among speakers in communities undergoing language shift.

CONCLUSION
This article compares three women, all native Ladino speakers living in Seattle, Washington. Though all of the women exhibit signs of language loss, the foreign-born women seem to differ from the American-born speaker in their evaluations of their own language use, with the foreign-born speakers indicating much higher linguistic security. Analysis of the speakers’ reactions to their own language mixing suggests that there is a certain prestige in using languages like French and Spanish while speaking Ladino, while using English is akin to admitting to language loss. Importantly, a comparison of these three women makes clear that the speakers’ perceived proficiency in a language does not necessarily correlate with their actual proficiency in the language. It could be helpful to keep this in mind when planning language maintenance and preservation programs in endangered language speech communities around the world.
Notes

* This article is the product of research undertaken for a previously published work and draws upon that work (FitzMorris). Any information included in this article is published with permission. I am indebted to Professor Ana Fernández Dobao of the Division of Spanish and Portuguese Studies for her feedback on an earlier draft of this work.

1. Marie was interviewed individually, but her husband, who is Ashkenazi and does not speak Ladino, was present for the duration of the interview.

2. All translations are my own.

3. This type of phrase, meaning, “I don't think we are going to . . . ” would trigger the subjunctive mood in Castilian Spanish, and would instead be realized as, “No creo que vayamos a . . . ”

4. These words, which mean “now” and “language,” would be “agora” and “lingua” for many speakers of Ladino.

5. Similarly, I have observed in both the United States and in Argentina, that many Spanish speakers will use the Ladino word “sefaradi” instead of the Spanish “sefardi” while speaking Spanish.

6. Marie knew at the time of the interview that I understood French.

7. Since this speaker uses three different languages, I will distinguish here between English, Ladino, and French: “I was born in a country in Africa, Elisabethville, the city . . . city . . . Elisabethville, Belgian Congo, Belgian Congo. In French it’s “Congo Belge.” And I was born in Elisabethville, nineteen thirty-seven, nineteen thirty-seven, July eighteenth, July eighteenth.”

8. It should be noted that Marie’s husband was present for the duration of the interview. This detail is important because, as mentioned above, Marie’s husband does not speak or understand Ladino, and so it is very probable that his presence affected the amount of English Marie used.

9. It turns out that the misunderstanding was due to my erroneous use of the word “padres” to mean “parents.” Though the masculine plural form is used in Castilian Spanish to mean both parents, in many dialects of Ladino, including the ones spoken in Seattle, one must say “padre i madre” to mean both parents.
Works Cited


INTER-CITY SEPHARDIC RELATIONS

The United States experienced an influx of Sephardim from Turkey and the Balkans from the end of the nineteenth century until the end of the first quarter of the twentieth. Aviva Ben-Ur estimates that as many as sixty-thousand Sephardic Jews entered the United States during this period, the majority remaining in New York City (“‘We Speak and Write This Language Against Our Will’” 131 and 140 n. 2). With the ever-increasing number of Sephardim to arrive in the country at the start of the twentieth century, correspondence between major Sephardic cities became apparent. This is, in part, due to the booming Judeo-Spanish printing press, primarily situated in New York City. Los Angeles, however, was home to one such periodical, *El Mesajero* (1933–35), which allows one to understand not only how the Los Angeles Sephardic community evolved, but also how its development fits into the larger narrative of Sephardim in the United States.

The Los Angeles Sephardic community was initially divided into three groups representing religious, charitable, and fraternal organizations: The Sephardic Hebrew Center (formerly known as the Peace and Progress Society), the Sephardic Community, and the Haim Vehessed Society. In the June 1934 edition of Los Angeles’s monthly Judeo-Spanish bulletin, *El Mesajero*, Samuel Berro writes that there is a great divide between these organizations. He notes that each community “has unfortunately maintained an attitude of indifference, isolation, and ignorance in the welfare and communal work of its
sister organizations now in existence in America, for the last twenty-five years or so” (“Let Us Promote” 6). This divide, he asserts, prevents the advancement of Sephardic life in Los Angeles.

The history of the Sephardic congregations in Los Angeles is one of a series of mergers, re-mergers, and name changes from as early as 1912 to as recently as 1994. While a number of Sephardic congregations are located throughout Los Angeles today, Judeo-Spanish speakers and their predominantly English-speaking descendants make up the minority. In 1912, the A(ha)vat Shalom Congregation broke into various factions, including Peace and Progress of the Rhodeslis—Jews originating from the Greek island of Rhodes—and the Sephardic Community of Los Angeles, consisting of Jews of Turkish origin. The former would change their name to that of the Sephardic Hebrew Center when they relocated their congregation to 55th and Hoover, while the latter would split into the Sephardic Community of Los Angeles and the Sephardic Brotherhood of Los Angeles (known as Haim Vehessed). In 1959, the original Sephardic Community of Los Angeles remerged into the Sephardic Community and Brotherhood of Los Angeles, eventually renamed as the Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel (STTI), whose congregation has been located at 10500 Wilshire Blvd since 1975. The Rhodesli Sephardic Hebrew Center was renamed Sephardic Beth Shalom in 1990, before merging congregations with the Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel and taking the name of the latter congregation. After eighty years of separations and mergers, the Judeo-Spanish-speaking congregations of the early 1900s were reunified.

The problem of solidarity among the Sephardim, however, was not unique to those in Los Angeles. Marc Angel, former Rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in New York, has noted a similar issue among his congregation of Sephardim early in the twentieth century. He notes, “A serious problem of New York’s Sephardim since their arrival . . . has been disunity” (95). Sephardim formed various congregations, societies, and social organizations based on the geographical origin from which they came. Therefore, Judeo-Spanish-speaking Sephardim formed congregations for those from Monastir, Kastoria, Dardanelles, Rhodes, Gallipoli, and Izmir, among others. Angel refers to such problems as a common development for Sephardic communities nationwide, as demonstrated by the case of the Sephardim in Los Angeles. He asserts: “The difficulties plaguing the New York Sephardim were those of the Sephardim in Seattle, Atlanta, Los Angeles, Rochester, Indianapolis, and elsewhere” (108). In this regard, New York City faced similar concerns, as did not only Los Angeles, but also other Sephardic communities nationwide.
Sefhardic communities were often in contact with one another. In July 1934, the then president of New York City’s Shearith Israel Congregation Dr. David de Sola Pool commended the Sefhardic community in Los Angeles’s *El Mesajero*. He writes to Dr. Benveniste congratulating him for “creating a genuine Sefhardic community,” one that appears to be unified despite representing various communities and their respective organizations (6). De Sola Pool comments that this sense of community “is something we have not succeeded in doing in New York, notwithstanding many well meant attempts.” He continues to congratulate Benveniste and the Sefhardim of Los Angeles for setting an example for Sefhardic communities nationwide. Despite editors of *El Mesajero* reporting on ruptures among Sefhardic organizations in Los Angeles, leading Sefhardim in New York City applauded these groups for working toward unification between them.

In its inaugural edition of *El Mesajero*, the editorial staff notes that they will be publishing articles on a monthly basis in New York’s *La Vara*. They indicate that, in this way, New York, as well as those receiving the publication abroad, will be well informed of activities occurring within the Los Angeles Sefhardic community. The staff of *El Mesajero* furthermore wanted “ke konoskan ke la sosiedad paz i progreso esta mas o menos kontribuendo a el dezvelopamiento moral i kultural de nuestra kolektividad,” that is to say, that the Sefhardic community “should know that the Peace and Progress Society is more or less contributing to the moral and cultural development of our collectivity” (“Artikolos en La Vara” 10). From these examples, we observe regular correspondence passing between Los Angeles and New York City Sefhardim.

The third largest Sefhardic community in the United States can be found in Seattle, Washington. The Sefhardic community of Los Angeles kept regular correspondence with Sefhardim in Seattle, as evinced by *El Mesajero*. For example, in the December 1934 edition, the editorial staff announced that the principal of the Talmud Torah in Seattle, Albert Levy, would be relocating to New York to take over the responsibility as editor of one of the city’s more successful newspapers, *La Vara* (“Una Nueva ‘Vara’” 2).

Editors of *El Mesajero* often wrote highly of Seattle, noting that the Sefhardim, with all of their separated organizations, could learn a great deal from their cohesion. In the bulletin’s October 1933 edition, Isaac Benveniste reflects upon his recent visit to Seattle and notes, “la komunidad se distinguo siempre por su avanzamiento, sus akmplimientos i por su atitud moderno en todas sus sferas de aktividad,” that is to say, “the community has continuously distinguished itself by its advancements, its accomplishments and for
its modern attitude in all spheres of activity” (2). He continues to highlight the strong connection among the Sephardim, both in religious and education settings. He notes that not only are Sephardim active within their community, but they are respected by their brethren, the Ashkenazim. Furthermore, Sephardim are making great strides in education, with several young men and women attending college and several taking on professional jobs.

Samuel Berro also called into question how the Sephardim could adapt culturally and linguistically in the United States, particularly in Los Angeles. He looked to Seattle as a model in solving the continuous problems of unity among the various Sephardic organizations in Los Angeles. In his April 1934 article, Berro comments that the Sephardim in Seattle have set “a fine example of the unity and brotherly love . . . through the creation of the Seattle Progressive Fraternity, a representative body which has constantly rendered great services to the Sephardic Jewry” (“A Great Sephardic United Front” 8). Such sentiments were echoed the subsequent month, where Berro again commended Seattle for its “remarkable example of good will,” noting that “the various fraternal and social organizations now in existence in Seattle are in excellent terms and friendly relations” (“Good Will” 6). Like Benveniste, Berro remained in close contact with the Sephardic community of Seattle in order to solve internal issues that the Sephardim were experiencing in Los Angeles.

The Sephardic community in the Northwest served as an inspiration to the Southwest, as demonstrated regularly in the Judeo-Spanish bulletin El Mesajero. And while Angel includes Seattle in his list of Sephardic cities nationwide that experienced “plagues” similar to those among Sephardim in New York City, the editors of El Mesajero only highlighted the progress made by the Sephardim in Seattle. Today, due to concentrated centers of religious and communal activity, Seattle’s Sephardic community may be considered more cohesive than those found in Los Angeles and New York City, where Sephardim currently live all throughout these cities.

Language Ideology and Shift among Sephardim

Angel notes that for many Sephardim the first problems experienced in coming to the United States were those on Ellis Island. According to articles published in the New York City Judeo-Spanish newspaper La Amerika, Turkish Jews “were not familiar with American immigration laws and did not know how to answer the questions put to them” (89). Such problems were the reason that the editor of La Amerika, Moise S. Gadol, published a booklet in 1916
entitled “Livro de Embezar las Linguas Ingleza i Yudish” (“Book for Learning the English and Yiddish Languages”). This served as a guide for Sephardim entering the United States, reviewing information they would need to know in order to become American citizens. Apart from the English component to this text, Yiddish was included so as to serve as a multilingual resource for the Sephardim. One section, “Egzamen por Devener Sudito Amerikano” (“Exam for Becoming an American Citizen”), reviewed possible questions that Sephardim could encounter upon taking their citizenship exam. These sections were printed in the Rashi alphabet, both in Judeo-Spanish as one may expect and in phonetically transliterated English. Gadol advertised this booklet and its various editions over the years of the newspaper’s publication (Kirschen 29).

In *El Mesajero*, Berro regularly contributed articles on how the Sephardim should make a strong effort to learn English. His December 1933 article, “Why ‘The Messenger’ Should Also Publish in English,” discusses the numerous benefits for the Sephardim to become active learners of the English language. He compares the Sephardim with the Ashkenazim, noting that the latter have made numerous strides in their acculturation into the United States, while the Sephardim have a great deal of work ahead of them. He writes, “It is to be regretted that contrary to our brethren, the Eshkenazim who have made a remarkable progress towards the culture and mastery of the English language, we Sephardic Jews, have contributed little to that valuable asset” (6). Berro suggests that the Sephardic community of Los Angeles is indifferent in many aspects and is generally just not interested in reading. Due to these concerns, he writes that *El Mesajero* will begin to also publish articles in English, thereby hoping to encourage readers—especially young ones—to learn the language. Berro also suggests that besides learning English, older Sephardim should be educating their youth on religious and cultural matters since they will be the leaders of the future. Berro suggests that these matters, in particular that of learning English, are fundamental for the Sephardim.

Including articles in English in Judeo-Spanish newspapers was also common in New York City. In August 1934, the editorial board of *El Mesajero* extended its congratulatory remarks to *La Vara* for “su loavel inisiativa de entrodusir una seksion ingleza en sus kolunas por el benfisio de nuestra joventud sefaradita,” or “their respectable initiative in introducing a section in English in their columns for the benefit of our Sephardic youth” (“Seksion Ingleza” 2). A month later, editors then suggested that Sephardic communities nationwide commend *La Vara* for introducing articles in English in its columns. They assert that the inclusion of English represents “a step forward toward the preservation
of many of our religious and other institutions in the future” (“English Section” 14). Of course, what they most likely did not consider at that time was that all shifts toward English would serve as a catalyst for the endangerment of their mother tongue in the years—and generations—to follow.

Not only did the Judeo-Spanish press comment on the linguistic hierarchy of English in the United States, but it also expressed various ideologies to its readership in regard to modern Spanish—Castilian. While some Sephardim in Los Angeles and New York City knew of Spanish-speaking populations before arriving in their new territories, those who did not know of these similar speech communities quickly came to realize their soon-to-be geographic and linguistic parallels. Ben-Ur notes, “In the goal to homogenize the two groups, it was clear who bore the burden of linguistic conformity. Ladino, not modern Castilian, was in need of rehabilitation, partly for pragmatic reasons” (Sephardic Jews in America 91). She cites articles in La Vara that would comment both on opportunities to learn modern Spanish for the Sephardim as well as hindrances in learning this variety. In a 1924 article entitled “Kursos Gratis de Lingua Kastiliana” (“Free Courses in the Castilian Language”), the director of organizations and clubs announced that sisterhood activists had asked Spanish professor Leo Pasternak to offer courses in Castilian Spanish to the Sephardim at the Settlement House located at 133 Eldridge Street (Sephardic Jews in America 91). These courses were to be offered twice a week and at no charge to those in attendance. Among those encouraged to enroll in these courses were those, “ke kieren a darsen a komersio kon los paizes de avla espanyola i para akeyos ke bushkan pozisiones de korespondensia i sekretarios en kozas de eksportasion,” that is to say, those “that want to get into business with Spanish-speaking countries and those who are looking for positions as correspondents and secretaries in exportation houses” (“Kursos Gratis” 9). The announcement suggests a number of reasons that the readership should take advantage of this opportunity. The sisterhood encouraged young men and women in particular to attend these courses since the Castilian language was widely used in both speech as well as literature.

While Judeo-Spanish speakers often considered learning Spanish as advantageous, there were also those who wanted to keep a distance established between the two languages, especially within the domains in which they emerged. Maír José Benardete contributed to La Vara on occasion and was accused of writing in Castilian in Hebrew characters, rather than in Judeo-Spanish. Ben-Ur reviews one such 1936 article, “La Boz de Nuestros Lektores,” in which readers complained about the inclusion of Benardete’s writings in
their newspaper. One reader notes that Benardete “is abusing the columns of La Vara and readers as well. . . . If Professor Benardete wishes to write Castilian, he should write for La Prensa, a Spanish newspaper which appears in New York” (Sephardic Jews in America 92). Regardless of content, the language that Benardete used appeared more similar to that of Castilian than Judeo-Spanish. In this case, it is clear that modern Spanish was not well received nor sought as a beneficial component to their newspaper. Rather, the inclusion of Castilian-like material offended some of La Vara’s readership and caused them to respond by making their discontent widely known to the Sephardic community at large.

PLACING JUDEO-SPANISH IN THE UNITED STATES TODAY
As section one reveals, Judeo-Spanish speakers in Los Angeles and New York City saw acculturation into American life as a main priority. Sephardim opted to use English as a visible—and audible—way to present themselves as American. Throughout such a process, they often learned that Yiddish and Hebrew, not Judeo-Spanish, were the Jewish languages of the United States and that Latin American Spanish rather than Judeo-Spanish was the primary Spanish variety in the country. These dynamics are necessary to recognize in order to comprehend the state in which the language finds itself today, as not only a Jewish language and a Romance language, but also as a modern and yet endangered one. In this section, I relate Judeo-Spanish to the theories of language endangerment, heritage languages, metalinguistic communities, diasporic language ideologies, (post-) vernaculars, and social networks. Collectively, these fields help identify the state of the language today in the United States and, in many cases, abroad.

As an Endangered Language
Like most languages in the world, Judeo-Spanish is endangered. According to Michael Krauss’s language endangerment typology, Judeo-Spanish would be classified as severely endangered, wherein the language is spoken only by those of the grandparental generation and older. Utilizing Joshua Fishman’s Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) would suggest a similar conclusion and place the language at least at Stage 7. In this stage, “most users
of Xish are a socially integrated and ethnolinguistically active population but they are beyond child-bearing age” (Reversing Language Shift 87). Given that Judeo-Spanish-speaking populations throughout the world represent different dialects of the language, as well as somewhat unique histories, one could categorize them individually based on the location of the Sephardim. Rey Romero, for example, suggests that the Judeo-Spanish-speaking community in Istanbul is at Stage 7 of Fishman’s GIDS, while those of Salonika and Sarajevo better fit into Stage 8 (65). In Stage 8 of GIDS, “most vestigial users of Xish are socially isolated old folks and Xish needs to be re-assembled from their mouths and memories” (Reversing Language Shift 88). No Judeo-Spanish-speaking community appears to fit into Stage 6 since, at this stage, Fishman suggests that younger generations attain the language from older generations. This may have been the case, however, during today’s quadragenarians’ and quinquagenarians’ childhoods, typically acquiring elements of the language from their parents or grandparents. Judeo-Spanish in the United States appears to be situated at Stage 8 along with several other communities of speakers worldwide.

As a Heritage Language
Those who do still speak the Judeo-Spanish language no longer use it on a daily basis, as many of their family members with whom they spoke it are deceased, and children of these speakers never acquired nor learned the language. The endangered state of the language positions most of its speakers as heritage speakers. Heritage speakers, according to Guadalupe Valdés, are individuals raised in homes where a language other than English is spoken and who are, to some degree, bilingual in English and the heritage language. To better understand and adapt this definition beyond English, I consider the distinction Elabbas Benmamoun, Silvina Montrul, and Maria Polinsky make between the majority language and the minority language, the former being “typically the language spoken by an ethno-linguistically dominant group in a country or region,” and the latter being the language “spoken by ethnolinguistic minority groups” (10). These two definitions complement one another since the majority language will need to be substituted since it will not always be English. Judeo-Spanish is not only a heritage language within the United States with English as the majority language, but among speakers in Israel with Hebrew as the majority language and Turkey with Turkish as the majority language. While Judeo-Spanish is the mother tongue for most speakers of the language, it is also a heritage language for these speakers. This occurs when the language
Diglossic Distribution among Judeo-Spanish-Speaking Sephardim

has restricted use and often remains in particular domains, such as the home or other familial settings.

As a Metalinguistic Community
Communities of Judeo-Spanish-speaking Sephardim throughout the world often come into contact with one another, not necessarily because of their shared Sephardic rite of Judaism, but due to their shared cultural and specifically linguistic heritage. Due to the establishment of both physical as well as virtual organizations in recent decades, speakers worldwide find themselves working together in an effort to host events and create programs in their local cities, while encouraging other Sephardim to participate. Many of those participating in such activities are highly proficient in Judeo-Spanish, while others see participation as a way to learn about a language that was not passed down to them by older generations. What forms among these participants is what Netta Rose Avineri refers to as a metalinguistic community. Avineri notes that such a community serves as a “framework for diverse participants who experience a strong connection to a language and its speakers but may lack familiarity with them due to historical, personal, and/or communal circumstances” (ii). While Avineri’s research concentrates on students of a variety of ages within the United States learning Yiddish within secular realms, Judeo-Spanish speakers often find themselves forming metalinguistic communities as well. One must learn how to become socialized into the culture of the language, whether or not that means actually speaking the language or having competence in it. This socialization allows those involved to understand and take pride in “the past as a way to understand one’s place in the present” (2). Therefore, the Judeo-Spanish global community is very much a metalinguistic one. Since Judeo-Spanish speakers are heritage speakers of their mother tongue, their active and passive proficiencies of the language vary widely. While one might be inclined to assume that younger speakers of Judeo-Spanish are often less proficient, this is not necessarily the case, as older speakers’ proficiencies will differ greatly depending on the community in which they reside and the domains in which they use their language(s).

As a Diasporic Language Ideology
One central characteristic of the Judeo-Spanish-speaking metalinguistic community is their socialization into diasporic language ideologies. Avineri notes
that such an ideology “focuses on linguistic structure as an iconic symbol of Jews’ mobile history. It is related to an ‘endangered’ language ideology in that it focuses on the ways that historical circumstances and forces beyond a community’s control have shaped the fate of a language” (225). In her research, Avineri discusses how introducing learners to the source language of the Yiddish lexicon facilitates the relationship between language and the community’s mobile history. In the case of the Judeo-Spanish language, it is curious to note that speakers have high metalinguistic awareness on the source language of various lexicons in their mother tongue. That is to say, speakers are often aware which lexicon enters Judeo-Spanish from languages other than Castilian. While Avineri explores the socialization of learners of Yiddish and the scope of this study deals with speakers of Judeo-Spanish, the diasporic language ideology performs similarly among learners and speakers of these languages, constructing what it means to be a Jewish language.

**As a Post-vernacular**

Speakers of Judeo-Spanish often iconize the language as a vehicle of memory traveling back in time over five centuries. The language, therefore, becomes more than a means of communication, but a symbolic remnant of Sephardic culture and history. This is similar to Jeffrey Shandler’s Yiddishland, where Yiddish in secular realms shifts from “a vernacular struggling for recognition of its legitimacy, to its current value as a prized object of heritage” (142). Although the primary purpose of language is to achieve communication between two or more speakers, the semiotics of language allows for the construction of additional meaning. That is to say, while Judeo-Spanish—much like Yiddish—one served primarily vernacular purposes, the language is often utilized as a post-vernacular. While the former values communication, the latter values use of a given language and its extra-symbolic meaning more. Judeo-Spanish as a post-vernacular “might be expected to do work beyond denotation and communication, acting also to preserve culture, promote identity, or stand for the past” (Brink-Danan 117). Thus, as speakers of Judeo-Spanish utilize their language, we must ask whether or not they do so merely for communicative purposes or for reasons beyond the verbalized content of their speech. This concept will prove valuable as we review the sociolinguistic histories of the Judeo-Spanish-speaking informants concerned with this study.
As a Social Network

Judeo-Spanish-speaking Sephardim in the United States are quite heterogeneous. While many share a middle-class or higher social standing today, their individual histories vary a great deal. In order to place all of these speakers into a given collectivity, the theory of the social network is useful to employ. According to Lesley Milroy, a social network “may be seen as a boundless web of ties which reaches out through a whole society, linking people to one another, however remotely” (550). This model is particularly beneficial given that speakers of Judeo-Spanish in the United States are first, one-point-five, or second-generation immigrants in the country. Furthermore, this model “provides a set of procedures for studying small groups where speakers are not discriminable in terms of any kind of social class index” (556). Given the communities in question, an analysis at the macro level does not seem beneficial to understand the internal relations among the Sephardim. However, while analyzing relations between the Judeo-Spanish-speaking Sephardim and Latino speakers of Spanish in Los Angeles and New York City, such an approach may prove useful. Speakers of Judeo-Spanish relate to one another in both strong and weak ties, in which the former represents relations with friends or family and the latter represents those relationships with acquaintances.

Judeo-Spanish speakers are often connected to other speakers of the language, albeit a limited number, and most commonly through relations of kinship. Strong ties between these speakers exist not only due to a blood connection, but also due to similar histories and a common mother tongue. The weak-tie model may be utilized, however, to ascertain the relation between Judeo-Spanish-speaking Sephardim and Spanish-speaking Latinos. Oftentimes, Judeo-Spanish speakers communicate with Spanish-speaking Latinos in various domains. Such weak-tie relations may be the cause for dialect (or language) leveling between Judeo-Spanish and modern Spanish. Milroy notes that in this process, leveling results in the “eradication of socially or locally marked variants (both within and between linguistic systems) in conditions of social or geographical mobility and resultant dialect contact” (565). This is also what Maír José Benardete refers to when Judeo-Spanish speakers who learn Spanish remove and replace features of their language “when confronted with genuine samples of the Spanish language in its modern vigor” (147). Similar to eradication is the concept of erasure, which Judith Irvine and Susan Gal define as “the process in which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible” (38). In this regard, it is expected that erasure will be a prevalent...
characteristic in leveling. As Judeo-Spanish speakers shift toward Peninsular and Latin American varieties of Spanish, they enable themselves to create more connections with speakers of Spanish who are outside of their Sephardic network. Oftentimes, however, the use of modern Spanish by Judeo-Spanish-speaking Sephardim results in a great deal of transference from their newly acquired language to their Judeo-Spanish, thus extending the moribund state of their ancestral tongue.

Many speakers are connected with one another virtually through the online listserv Ladinokomunita, established in 2000. This listserv provides a unique case of the strong- vs. weak-tie model. The only requirement for posting in this online forum is that all messages be written in (a dialect of) Judeo-Spanish. Although many members of this virtual network do not speak the language themselves—as either students or researchers—those who most often contribute to the continuous array of conversations are proficient—and often native speakers—of the language. Frequent contributors to this virtual network oftentimes do not know each other, thus establishing a weak-tie connection with one another. However, what is most curious is that, upon reading the forums over the years, members across the globe establish strong-tie connections with one another due to their connection through the Judeo-Spanish language. In reading the forums, one notes that speakers often write that they feel immediate familial connections with other contributors to the forum, particularly due to common shared stories, sayings, and mobile histories. As a result of establishing such strong virtual rapports, members of Ladinokomunita began organizing annual trips (starting in 2007), where participants meet one another and travel to various sites related to Sephardic history. Several of the informants that participated in this study—both from Los Angeles and New York City—have established a social network with one another formed by this virtual community.

METHODOLOGY

This section reviews a number of languages that are frequently part of the Sephardic narrative, along with their domains of utility. In order to explore these domains, I conducted sociolinguistic interviews with twenty-five (n=25) speakers of Judeo-Spanish. Interviews were typically conducted in groups of two and carried out in Judeo-Spanish. Of the twenty-five informants, twelve
reside in the metropolitan area of New York, and thirteen reside in Los Angeles. Informants are first, one-point-five, or second-generation immigrants in the United States.

Twelve of the twenty-five informants in this study are male (n=6 in LA, n=6 in NYC), and thirteen are female (n=7 in LA, n=6 in NYC). Nine informants in the present study were born in the United States, while sixteen informants were born abroad. Those born in the United States were born in New York City, Los Angeles, or Seattle. The locations of those born abroad consist of cities throughout Turkey (Istanbul, Izmir, Milas) and Greece (Thessaloniki, Kavalla, Rhodes) as well as Italy (Milan), Bulgaria (Sofia), Mexico (Mexico D.F.), Rhodesia (Salisbury and Que Que—current-day Harare and Kwekwe, Zimbabwe), and Cuba (Havana). Several of those born outside the United States grew up in countries other than those in which they were born, including France, Spain, and Israel. The average number of years living in the United States for those born abroad is forty-seven. This range encompasses informants who arrived nearly seventy-five years ago, at the age of five or six, and as little as ten years ago in the exceptional case of the youngest informant to this study. The mean age of participants in this study is 74.25, which is quite telling in regard to who speaks the language today. The language is not being transmitted to younger generations, with the rare occasion of passive acquisition. The oldest participant in this study is eighty-nine years old, while the youngest is forty-three. My study consists of two quadragenarians, one quinquagenarian, four sexagenarians, eight septuagenarians, and ten octogenarians. The existence of a speaker below the age of fifty is quite rare today; these speakers typically share similar narratives in growing up with their nona or vava (grandmother) at home. The mean age for participants in New York City is seventy-two and for Los Angeles is seventy-six. The mean age of all males participating in this study is 69.25 and of females is 78.75.

Throughout this study, I follow a similar system of coding participants to that of Romero. Aside from coding for gender and age, I also indicate the city in which participants reside. For example, M_{LA}76 is a seventy-six-year-old male participant residing in Los Angeles. Correspondingly, F_{NY}88 is an eighty-eight-year-old female participant residing in New York. The following data comes from these interviews.
DIGLOSSIC DISTRIBUTION
Using selections from the sociolinguistic interviews described above, this section reveals the multilingual nature of the Sephardim. I describe the diglossic distribution of my participant pool, a term that I use to explore the languages that participants speak in addition to the domains in which they use each of them. Aside from Sephardim speaking a variety of languages—several mentioned in earlier sections—I examine patterns of participant narratives that demonstrate the unique roles in which these languages function in relation to Judeo-Spanish. In this section, I discuss Turkish and Greek as secret languages, Hebrew as the language of recitation, French as the language of the elite, Portuguese as the language of comparison, and perceived prestige among modern Spanish dialects. I then discuss the concept of linguistic insecurity, code-switching, and code-shifting as evidenced by (proficient) participants of this study.

Diglossia
One of the most useful sociolinguistic models that may be applied to Judeo-Spanish-speaking Sephardim is that of diglossia. The term diglossia describes domains of language use when there is more than one language used in a given community. This community can be a single city, state, or country. Charles Ferguson developed this theory in exploring varieties of the same language. After assessing the domains in which speakers used Classical Arabic (Fusha) compared to Colloquial Arabic (Darija or Ammiyyah) in Arabic-speaking countries, Ferguson determined that diglossia could be divided into two tiers: High (H) and Low (L). Classical Arabic, Fusha, would be the High variety of the language, given its prestige and connection to liturgical texts such as the Quran. The community at large must learn this variety. The native varieties of Arabic, Ammiyyah or Darija, are the colloquial vernaculars of Arabic, and thus classified as the Low variety. Further research he conducted comparing German and Swiss-German in Switzerland and French and Creole in Haiti strengthened his argument that each variety of language pertained to a specific social territory. He notes that speakers of a given language, where linguistic variety is a staple in society, are nurtured into diglossic behavior and understanding. Ferguson posits that the High (H) variety is typically the prestigious one, often associated with literary history, education, and religion. This variety, which may vary in any linguistic branch from its lower (L) counterpart, is often a learned variety, and not acquired as a native tongue. The Low (L) variety of
diglossia is used to describe one's mother tongue, which is often spoken in the home and more familiar domains.

Subsequent theory on diglossia has expanded the original model and allowed for the inclusion of speech communities that may use two typologically distant languages in the High and Low domains. Shortly after Ferguson published his theory of diglossia, additional research by scholars in related fields expanded upon this model. Joan Rubin's research in Paraguay was pivotal for the theoretical extension of diglossia. Diglossia, as attested to by Ferguson, explored the relation of varieties of a given related language and their unique domains. Rubin, however, documented the linguistically unrelated languages of Guarani and Spanish, which were used side by side in a similar socio-linguistic manner that Ferguson initially described by means of diglossia.

Soon after, Fishman suggested the term extended diglossia, accounting for such cases reported by Rubin. Fishman's theoretical extension of diglossia, therefore, described sociolinguistic phenomena that occur when two language varieties, related to one another or not, are utilized in distinct ways within a given speech community. Fishman explains that High and Low varieties are still relevant to this extended understanding of diglossia. Whereas the High variety is utilized in the domains of high culture—education, religion, and politics—the Low variety is employed throughout the home, social gatherings, and work. His own research, based on Yiddish and Hebrew, fits appropriately into this extended model. He describes Yiddish (pre-World War II) as the L variety whereas Hebrew served as the H variety. Yiddish (L) would be used for intragroup communication, while Hebrew (H) would serve religious, cultural, and liturgical purposes.

Ferguson's theory of diglossia, along with Fishman's extended diglossia, should be considered when dealing with language description and typology as well as historical linguistics. Given that languages are often in contact with one another within and across nations, diglossia may serve as an appropriate theoretical model in exploring the multidimensional sociolinguistic patterns within a speech community. Related fields, such as bilingualism or contact linguistics, complement the theory of diglossia, varying, however, in both their approach and end goal. While bilingualism may be present in a diglossic community, it is used to describe the linguistic behavior and knowledge of a speaker. Diglossia, however, serves to describe the linguistic organization at the socio-cultural level. Diglossia is often related to bilingualism as various languages or language varieties/repertoires are involved. Exploring a particular speech community will reveal the degree of bilingualism among speakers, the
sociolinguistic situation of diglossia, and whether or not these two phenomena are intertwined.

**Turkish and Greek as Secret Languages**

Many Sephardim report that their parents hardly spoke in Judeo-Spanish, and that they learned whatever they know from their grandparents, from *dichas* (sayings) to *konsejas* (stories). Those who do recall their parents speaking in Judeo-Spanish note that their parents only spoke it when they did not want them—their children—to understand what they were saying. Tracy Harris accounts for this phenomenon in her research, stating that many youth understood more than their parents thought they did (167). This is one of the domains that Harris suggests Judeo-Spanish inhabits today, as the “secret language” of the Sephardim. Although the participants in my study are all highly proficient in Judeo-Spanish, they have slightly different narratives, still relating to this concept. MLA85—born in New York City, residing in Los Angeles during his adult life, and whose parents were born in Salonika—comments that his parents spoke in Turkish, Greek, or Bulgarian when they didn’t want him to understand what they were saying. He notes that for his parents, having lived in the Balkans, this was a natural way of life and communication for them. Similarly, participant MNY53 notes that Turkish and Greek were the “go-to” languages for his parents since Judeo-Spanish was the language of the household for everyone. He notes,

(1a.) En mi kaza siempre se avlava todo en ladino, i kuando no kerian ke los ijikos entendieran, avlavan en turko, si no turko, grego.

(1b.) In my house, Judeo-Spanish was always spoken, and when they [the parents] didn’t want the kids to understand, they spoke in Turkish, if not Turkish, Greek.

This is often the reason that, apart from of Judeo-Spanish, several participants are familiar with certain words or phrases in Turkish or Greek; this is due to acquiring them at a young age. Similarly, younger generations of Sephardim in the United States share passive knowledge of Judeo-Spanish since their parents would use the language with each other when they did not want their child(ren) to be a part of the conversation, thus believing that their child did not understand. Participant FNY80—born in Manhattan, raised in Brooklyn,
and whose parents were from Salonika—recalled a difference in the languages
her parents spoke at home depending on the subject matter. She comments:

(2a.) Mis parientes avlavan en grego kuando no kerian ke mozotros en-
tendiaramos lo ke estavan avlando, i kuando avlavan en turko era
importante ke no saviamos lo ke estavan avlando.

(2b.) My parents spoke in Greek when they didn’t want us to understand
what they were saying, and when they spoke in Turkish it was very
important that we didn’t understand what they were speaking about.

Judeo-Spanish, however, was her first language—she only learned
English when she began school. In this case, her parents made a conscious
decision about which language to use based on the topic and possible under-
standing by their daughter.

**Hebrew as the Language of Recitation**
Informants of this study indicated a wide range of proficiencies in Hebrew,
ranging from a few words and phrases to fluency. Those fluent in Hebrew typi-
cally spent a number of years in Israel, such as participant MLA86, who lived
there for seventeen years. Others either went to a kibbutz, ulpan, or rabbinical
school in Israel. Only a select number of participants are highly proficient in
Hebrew, all of whom are males. This does not come as a surprise, however,
since it is the man who often learns Hebrew to utilize not only in communica-
tive contexts but also for religious purposes. In most traditional ceremonies,
men carry out the reading of prayers in Hebrew.

On the other side of the spectrum, several participants—both male and
female—express various degrees of proficiency in Hebrew, but only in certain
domains. That is to say, these participants are/were able to read Hebrew for re-
ligious purposes, most of the time without understanding what they are/were
reading. This is a common experience, however, not just for the Sephardim. In
the United States, like many countries outside of Israel, Jewish youth partici-
pate in some sort of religious after-school program in order to prepare them for
their Bar or Bat Mitzvah ceremony, a service that officially recognizes them as
an adult. Participants would regularly go to these schools after attending a day
of public—secular—education. Such a ceremony varies based on the country
in question as well as the period of time referenced. Many of the participants
in this study—either raised in Turkey or the United States—noted that they
learned enough Hebrew to read the language, a skill oftentimes forgotten years after attending religious school if they did not continue attending synagogue services. These religious schools, regularly known as Talmud Torah (literally, the study of Torah), placed reading Hebrew (mostly biblical but sometimes modern) as a high-function domain. In this setting, being able to read Hebrew serves as the prestigious H variety, which must be learned, and is valued over communicative acts of proficiency in the language.

While most of my informants were too young to remember newspapers in Judeo-Spanish, participant MNY86 comments that once he learned the Hebrew alphabet in preparation for his Bar Mitzvah, he began to read the La Vara newspaper that his parents would receive. He notes that, while he did not actually understand when reading Hebrew in the Hebrew alphabet, he was able to understand articles in Judeo-Spanish written in the Hebrew alphabet. This case seems common in reviewing Denah Levy’s research of Sephardim from Izmir in New York as of the early 1940s, noting that younger generations of Sephardim did not usually learn how to read or write in Judeo-Spanish. Proficiency in the Hebrew alphabet, nevertheless, was attained upon studying Hebrew. While literacy in Judeo-Spanish was more common among men due to a greater number being enrolled in some sort of Hebrew school, women did account for some of the readership of Judeo-Spanish periodicals (Ben-Ur, “Ladino Press”).

As Bar Mitzvahs became a part of Sephardic culture—primarily due to Ashkenazi influence—Sephardim would often deliver their Bar Mitzvah speeches in Judeo-Spanish with smatterings of religious quotations and expressions in Hebrew throughout. This was the case for MLA85 and a number of testimonies recounted by Hank Halio (62). Among Sephardim today, Bar Mitzvah speeches are no longer delivered in Judeo-Spanish; however, the use of terms and proverbs in Hebrew is still commonplace alongside a predominantly English discourse.

**French as the Language of the Elite**

Several participants, either born abroad or whose parents were born abroad, were proficient in French. This is due to the fact that they attended L’Alliance Israëlite Universelle, a chain of schools established throughout the Ottoman Empire that sought to educate—and westernize—the Jews. One way in which L’Alliance accomplished such a task was by making the French language the primary language of instruction and “remapping the linguistic and cultural
terrain of Jews in these regions” (Rodrigue and Stein xxv). Sephardim often replaced their everyday Judeo-Spanish with French, believing it to be more modern, intellectual, and rich in culture. Aron Rodrigue states that the positioning of French as the elite language situated all other languages of the Sephardim at the peripheries, noting that “the place given to French as the language of mass education created a non-integrated polyglot Jewry unprepared for the requirements of the new nation-state” (172). Despite being exposed to a variety of languages, the Sephardim often received most of their academic training in French.

FNY80 notes that when her mother came to New York, she used her knowledge of French to pronounce common street names in New York City. She recalls:

(3a.) Mi madre kuando era chika en Salonik, estava estudando en l’alliance fransez, i kuando vinieron aki en New York, estava kaminando por las kayes—Orshád Street, not Orchard Street—Orshád, Delancé Street, not Delancey. So, everything with the French accent.9

(3b.) When my mother was little in Salonika, she was studying at L’Alliance, and when they [the parents] came here in New York, she was walking in the street—Orshád Street, not Orchard Street—Orshád, Delancé Street, not Delancey. So, everything with the French accent.

This example illustrates that the French language—and the ideologies associated with it—may have even affected the way in which Sephardim learned English in the United States.

**Portuguese as the Language of Comparison**

While most informants related the roots of the Judeo-Spanish language to Castilian Spanish, some recognize the greater peninsular connection to the language, the Portuguese element.10 Some participants believe that, in some ways, Judeo-Spanish is more similar to Portuguese than Spanish, despite none of them being proficient in any variety of Portuguese. This was the case for MLA85, MNY66, FLA80, and FNY80, all born and raised in New York City to parents from Salonika, Greece. FLA80 comments on Judeo-Spanish,

(4a.) Me parese a mi komo portugez, komo avlan los portugezes; los sonidos son muy suaves.

(4b.) To me, it seems like Portuguese, how the Portuguese speak; the sounds are very pleasant.
These comments are not surprising, however, since Salonikan Judeo-Spanish shares certain features with Portuguese, such as the initial -f in fazer ‘to do’ and fijo ‘son’. Portuguese also shares a number of other features with different Judeo-Spanish dialects not necessarily related to Salonikan Judeo-Spanish. Like Judeo-Spanish, Portuguese includes the phonemes /ʃ/ and /ʒ/, as well as many equivalent lexemes. Furthermore, and most likely outside of the metalinguistic detection of any informant, Brazilian Portuguese raises un-stressed /e/ → [i] and /o/ → [u] as do certain dialects of Judeo-Spanish, attested and produced by our Rhodesli informants.

Perceived Prestige among Modern Spanish Dialects

Because participants’ families can be traced to Spain and their language is an aural remnant of this period dating back over five centuries, informants often hold much nostalgia for the land from which their ancestors came. Many participants have never stepped foot in Spain, while others commented that they have traveled to the country in the past. One pattern among the participants, however, is that they regard Peninsular Spanish—which they regularly call Castilian—to be more prestigious and purer than that of the Spanish spoken in the Americas. There is a strong preference for Peninsular Spanish over varieties spoken in other countries that are more representative of the Spanish-speaking populations within the United States. F_{LA}80 notes:

(5a.) La djente en Nu York, kreo ke avlan mucho (sic) puertorikenyo i kubano i es muy difer[ente], i para mi no es el puro espanyol.

(5b.) The people in New York speak Puerto Rican and Cuban [Spanish] and it is very differ[ent], and for me, that is not pure Spanish.

Sharing a similar belief, F_{NY}80 notes that she has a difficult time understanding Puerto Ricans speaking Spanish, due to how fast they speak the language. F_{NY}76 also prefers Castilian Spanish, despite the fact that she often hears Dominican Spanish spoken around her neighborhood. She describes Dominican Spanish as being unique in that:

(6a.) No tienen konsonantos alkavo de los biervos . . . los ke lavoran, los dominikanos.

(6b.) They don’t have consonants at the end of their words . . . those that work [here], the Dominicans.
FNY76 then proceeds to provide examples of speech that contain word final deletion as well as word final nasalization, features associated with Dominican—and other varieties of Caribbean—Spanish.12

Another informant, MNY53, notes that he works with people from Latin America who speak Spanish every day, each in the Spanish of his or her home country. In regard to how he communicates with them, he states:

(7a.) Yo trato de avlar kon—trato, no se si lo ago, ma trato de avlar kon—el espanyol, kon el aksento de Espanya ke me agrada.

(7b.) I try to speak—I try, but I don’t know if I do it, but I try to speak—in Spanish, with the accent from Spain, which I like.

He explains that he always utilizes this variety of Spanish regardless of the origin of his Spanish-speaking interlocutor. Furthermore, despite infrequent contact with Spaniards, he states that he has not advertently or inadvertently shifted to any Latin American variety of the language. MLA43, on the other hand, remarks that ever since he moved to Los Angeles ten years ago from Turkey, the variety of modern Spanish he speaks has changed. He recalls:

(8a.) El problema es ke kuando yo vine aki tuvi muncha difikulta porke kuando yo yegi aki avlava el kastilyano de Espanya, i kon aksento espanyol, pero desafortunadamente ya se me perdio (sic)—avlo mas kon aksento mehikano.13

(8b.) The problem is that when I came here I had a lot of difficulty because when I arrived here I spoke Spanish from Spain and with a Spanish accent. Unfortunately, I lost it—I speak more with a Mexican accent.

When asked why he considered this to be unfortunate, he reiterated that he had first learned Peninsular Spanish in Turkey, and that was his preferred variety of the language. Participants do not often elaborate on why they prefer one dialect to the other, but given their familial origins in Spain, we can conjecture why many Sephardim hold such ideologies close to heart.

**Linguistic Insecurity**

Participants in this study often remarked that they had not spoken Judeo-Spanish in—or for—such a long time. Several commented that they rarely use the language, even if they are in frequent contact with someone who is proficient in it, such as a spouse or sibling. It is clear that Judeo-Spanish is never
the preferred language of communication among the Sephardim today, given their proficiencies in a number of other languages. Other participants noted that they use Judeo-Spanish often but rarely have entire conversations in it. The production of certain words, expressions, and songs seems to be the remnants of the language for most speakers today. For some, speaking in Judeo-Spanish during the entire sociolinguistic interview proved challenging, and several commented on how proud they felt for “staying in the language” for so long. Others, however, often turned to me to ask how to say certain words in Judeo-Spanish. M185, in preparation for our interview, brought a Judeo-Spanish to English dictionary, as well as his wife’s Spanish to English dictionary. He mentioned that he often refers to the Spanish to English dictionary since Judeo-Spanish and modern Spanish are so similar.

Several participants displayed various degrees of linguistic insecurity while speaking. Jack C. Richards and Richard W. Schmidt note that linguistic insecurities are “experienced by speakers or writers about some aspect of their language use or about the variety of language they speak,” resulting in “modified speech, when speakers attempt to alter their way of speaking in order to sound more like the speakers of a prestige variety” (31). During the sociolinguistic interviews, linguistic insecurity was present; however, no participant felt that Judeo-Spanish was a jargon or any less important than other varieties of Spanish. Whether or not participants approximate modern Spanish varieties in their Judeo-Spanish speech may not necessarily be due to linguistic insecurity, as it is often the case that recurrent contact with modern Spanish has altered their lesser-used Judeo-Spanish.

**Code-switching and Code-shifting**

Harris’s *Death of a Language* carefully explores code-switching (Poplack) and code-shifting (Silva-Corvalán) among Judeo-Spanish speakers in New York City, Los Angeles, and cities throughout Israel. One theory of differentiation between these terms is that while code-switching occurs when speakers implement two or more languages in a given dialogue (within a single sentence, constituent, or throughout sentences), code-shifting occurs when speakers try to maintain conversation in a language that is not their dominant one, thus utilizing other—and more proficient languages—in their discourse. These are phenomena that can be witnessed throughout several of my informants’ comments, which I include throughout this study. Harris’s findings suggest that code-switching and code-shifting are the most salient characteristics of Judeo-
Spanish today, whereas English and modern Spanish lexicons most regularly appear in Judeo-Spanish speech in the United States. In fact, among her ninety-one informants, Harris notes, “There was rarely a sentence uttered by the informants that did not contain some kind of recent borrowing from English, modern Spanish, French, or Hebrew” (191). Outside of Los Angeles and New York City, FitzMorris’s research also indicates a similar trend in code-shifting among Judeo-Spanish speakers in Seattle, particularly among Los Ladineros (8).

While code-switching and code-shifting were also evident throughout my informants’ speech, Harris’s findings do not concur with mine. That is to say, informants in my study did not code-switch to the same (high) degree that Harris’s did. This is most likely due to the design of my study and selection of participants; I sought out speakers who acknowledged their ability and willingness to speak in Judeo-Spanish for extended periods of time. Like Harris, my informants were native—or heritage—speakers of the language, each representing unique sociolinguistic histories. It is very likely that of the dozens of informants who could have participated in my study but did not, either due to linguistic insecurity or actual low proficiencies in the language, many would have shown high levels of code-shifting.

**CONCLUDING DISCUSSION**

Linguistic patterns among Sephardim in the United States can be traced to the development of nationalistic ideologies that have encouraged this group to become “American” and speak English. These ideologies can be observed throughout the Judeo-Spanish press, which reached metropolises of speakers prior to World War II, thereby altering the linguistic landscape of their communities. Furthermore, many speakers today deem varieties of modern Spanish—either Peninsular or Latin American—more valuable in society given the ethnolinguistic makeup of the United States. Some speakers contribute their rather fast ability to learn modern Spanish to their familiarity with Judeo-Spanish, using their mother tongue as a platform to develop proficiency in the language. In this respect, MNY53 believes:

(9a.) Si no lo uviera savido [el ladino], no kreygo ke uviera podido am-bezarme el espanyol moderno i estar al nivel ke esto.
If I hadn't known [Judeo-Spanish], I don't believe that I would have been able to learn modern Spanish and be at the level that I am in it.

Since Judeo-Spanish is a minority language and typically not known about among non-Jewish speakers of modern Spanish, the Sephardim are the ones who have become aware of such linguistic differences, not the other way around. Given that modern Spanish is more widespread than Judeo-Spanish in the United States and abroad, it serves as a majority language in which many Sephardim become proficient. This contrasts with Judeo-Spanish in that its speakers were to acquire the language as their first or heritage language.

Aside from modern Spanish, Sephardim exhibit proficiency in a number of languages outlined throughout this article. These languages pertain to the mobile history of their ancestors and to those with which they have come into contact. In regard to Judeo-Spanish speakers in the United States, however, it appears that their diglossic distribution currently places these languages in unique domains, most of which have disappeared with the passing of older generations of Sephardim. Judeo-Spanish may be pushed to the peripheries of use for most speakers today; however, it continues to reappear in a variety of religious, familial, and social gatherings among speakers of the language.

The analysis of sociolinguistic narratives from twenty-five Judeo-Spanish speakers in two of the largest Sephardic populations in the United States reveals a great deal about how the language and culture of the Sephardim has developed throughout the country over the past century. Although Judeo-Spanish, the mother tongue of all informants of this study, is only one of the several languages spoken by the Sephardim, it allows for extended utility. The Sephardim's overall detachment from Judeo-Spanish has found new life for the language given close contact—both geographically as well as linguistically—with other Spanish-speaking populations. While replacing Judeo-Spanish with modern Spanish continues to endanger the ethnolinguistic vitality of the mother tongue of many Sephardim, speakers have chosen practicality over their former linguistic ways; Sephardim in Los Angeles and New York City utilize Judeo-Spanish as a platform to learn varieties of Spanish outside of their Sephardic networks.
Notes


2. This is according to modern day borders. Rhodes, formerly part of the Ottoman Empire, came under the control of the Italians in 1912. Rhodes became a part of Greece in 1947.

3. In 1975, the move to STTI was made from their prior location at 1561 W. Santa Barbara Avenue (Martin Luther King Boulevard today). In 1981 the sanctuary of STTI was completed.

4. I have constructed this timeline from a variety of sources including: 1) Angel and Rome; 2) Benveniste; 3) Hasson; 4) Hattem; and 5) various editions of *El Mesajero* (1933–35).

5. Consisting of both Turkish (Sephardic Bikur Holim) and Rhodesli (Ezra Bessaroth) congregations.

6. The moderators of the forum also request the use of the National Authority of Ladino’s Aki Yerushalayim convention of orthography. I have been an active member of this forum for the past five years. For further information on *Ladinokomunita* as a Digital Home Land or (Post) Vernacular see 1) Held; and 2) Brink-Danan.

7. An ulpan is an intensive course for learning Hebrew.

8. *La Vara*, the last Judeo-Spanish newspaper in the United States, stopped publishing its paper as of 1948.


10. For a historical overview of Judeo-Spanish in contact with Portuguese, see Quintana.

11. While in broad terms *castellano* can refer to the Spanish language, in narrow terms it refers to the Castilian Spanish of Spain. Informants typically utilize the term “Castilian” to refer to the narrow definition, differentiating the Spanish spoken in Spain from the Spanish spoken in Latin America. They seem to be unaware of the variety of Spanish spoken in Southern Spain, which contains a considerable number of features in common with Latin American varieties.

12. Her remarks make it clear that she is cognizant of word final deletion (“no tienen konsonantes alkavo de los biervos”) as a feature of Dominican Spanish, but makes no reference to nasalization, which she also most likely perceives as deletion.

13. One familiar with Judeo-Spanish lexicon, syntax, and phonology will notice modern Spanish influence in MLA43’s comment, or possibly, shifting between Judeo-Spanish and modern Spanish.

14. Of Harris’s ninety-one informants, n=28 in NY, n=35 in LA, n=28 throughout Israel.

15. According to FitzMorris, the Ladineros are a “self-selected group coming together to practice and preserve the Judeo-Spanish language” (8).
Works Cited


“And she loved brown people”: Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff’s Affirmation of Arab Jewish Identity in Jacob’s Ladder

by Joyce Zonana

I begin this essay about Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff’s neglected 1951 Egyptian Jewish American autobiographical novel Jacob’s Ladder with a small incident from my own Egyptian Jewish American childhood. I was eight years old, visiting my mother’s relatives in São Paulo with my mother and brother. While my parents and I had immigrated to the United States from Cairo early in 1951 when I was eighteen months old, the extended family—my mother’s parents, younger sister, and two brothers—had remained in Egypt until 1956, when, along with so many others, they hastily left their homeland in the wake of the Tri-Partite Invasion (the “Suez Crisis,” during which England, France, and Israel attacked Egypt in response to Gamal Abdel Nasser’s nationalization of the Suez Canal). Unable to obtain visas to enter the US, they settled in Brazil. Now, in the spring of 1958, we were with them on a long-anticipated lengthy visit.

Living with my relatives in São Paulo allowed me to rediscover the milieu my family had left behind in Cairo: the sweet circle of women and children sewing and cooking and laughing together, the bold gestures and loud talk of the men who joined us daily for lunch and dinner after their forays into the city. I marveled at it all, soaking in the wild mix of languages—English, French, Italian, Arabic, Portuguese—and the happy interplay of generations. Spending time with my elderly grandparents was especially precious: I loved to watch as my nearly blind Nonna gracefully peeled onions, to stand beside my gentle Nonno as he meticulously sorted stamps for his voluminous collection.
Most thrilling of all, though, was the week I spent with my mother, aunt, cousins and brother in Santos, the seaside resort a few hours from São Paulo. My mother was at her most relaxed, happy to be in the sun with her sister. Over and over, the two women delighted to note how the town’s curving corniche resembled the one in Alexandria, how their children’s carefree days on the beach reminded them of their own summers at Ras-el-Bar in the Nile Delta. With my brother and my cousins, I swam and walked and played in the sand, buoyed by an unaccustomed sense of freedom and safety.

The shock came when we returned to São Paulo, just as we were settling down for lunch in my aunt’s large apartment. As I entered the room, dressed in a short skirt, eager to tell my grandfather about our beach holiday, he pointed at my knees and told my mother that I must wash them. How could she let her daughter come to the table with dirty knees? Humiliated, I retreated to the bathroom and scrubbed my knees with a stiff cloth. When I returned, my grandfather again pointed to my knees and addressed my mother in French: “Elle est sale!—She is filthy!” Roughly, I scrubbed myself again. To no avail. When I re-entered the dining room, my grandfather exploded: “Elle a l’air Arabe—She looks Arab!” he berated my mother. “You should not have allowed her to spend so much time in the sun!”

“Elle a l’air Arabe!” The words stunned and mystified me. Why was it bad to look Arab? Today I understand that my grandfather saw my sun-browned skin as a challenge to his effort to have our Middle Eastern Jewish family pass as European—in Brazil as well as in Egypt. But in 1958, at the age of eight, all I knew was that I should somehow be ashamed that I looked Arab, and that to be Arab was to be dark, dirty, and outcast—barred from the family table. And yet, this was the same family that relished Arabic food, spoke words of endearment and entreaty in Arabic, swooned and sometimes even danced to the rhythms of Arabic music. What was wrong with looking Arab if one in fact stemmed from an Arab country?

The term “Arab Jew” has been most memorably explored and affirmed by Ella Habiba Shohat in her 1992 essay “Dislocated Identities: Reflections of an Arab Jew,” though that term—or its interesting and perhaps more accurate analogue, “Jewish Arab”—has been claimed (and contested) by many writers and scholars before and after. In her brief autobiographical essay, Shohat calls into question the Eurocentric, Zionist opposition of Arab and Jew, noting that “Americans are often amazed to discover the existentially nauseating or charmingly exotic” (8) possibilities of what they had previously considered to be an oxymoron. Because of this reaction, she writes, Oriental—Mizrahi
and Sephardi—Jews are subject to a “profound and visceral schizophrenia” (8). Elsewhere, Shohat carefully analyzes the “lethal binarisms” (*Taboo Memories* 332) that set Arab against Jew, as she explores the “physical, political, and cultural rupture” (334) that has elided the “embeddedness of Jewish life in . . . Muslim culture” (343). Similarly, David Shasha, editor of the online *Sephardic Heritage Update*, has devoted an entire issue to the term. “If Jews cannot be Arabs,” Shasha asks, “what happens to our culture?”

Our food, our music, our religion . . . is all predicated on the foundation of Judaism . . . but also on the civilization created after the Muslim conquests. Once the Arab substrate is eliminated, all we have is a Judaism that has lost Maimonides, Moses Ibn Ezra, and Israel Najara. (9)

Jews from the Middle East have much to gain in reclaiming their Arab identity and heritage, and Europeanized Jews, including Americans, have much to learn from Arab-Jews. Jacqueline Kahanoff, I will argue here, is one of our best teachers.

Many writers about Egyptian Jewish society in the twentieth century have noted the complex identities of Jews living in Cairo and Alexandria, where—before 1948—the opposition was not so much between “Jew” and “Arab” as between “European”—or “foreign,” “Western,” and “modern”—and “Egyptian,” “native,” “Eastern,” and “traditional.” Ultimately, within this context, many Egyptian Jews came to identify themselves as Western. Nevertheless, Jacques Hassoun, an Egyptian Jew who immigrated to France in 1954, insists that “the Jews of Egypt should not be indexed with a singular definite article” (172), noting that they had to cope with the contradictions of belonging to two worlds. Caught in this duality, they appeared to exclaim, like Abdallah al-Yahudi, the beggar of Tatwig Street in Alexandria: “See my galabia, I am Egyptian! See my jacket, I am European!” (169)

Among Egyptian Jewish writers living in the US and writing in English, Andre Aciman, Gini Alhadeff, Lucette Lagnado, Jean Naggar, Colette Rossant, and Joyce Zonana have all explored the ways in which Jews in Egypt saw themselves as both European and Arab or Egyptian. Jean Naggar, who grew up in one of Cairo’s wealthiest Jewish families thinking of herself as Italian, maintains that the “language that meant home,” “what most defined my childhood self,” was Arabic (366–67). Similarly, Lucette Lagnado, in *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*, records her father’s heartbreaking lament, “‘Ragaouna Masr’—
Take us back to Cairo” (163), as their ship leaves Alexandria in 1963. Later, resisting a New York Ashkenazi social worker’s efforts to have him conform to Western norms, Lagnado’s father proudly affirms, “We are Arab, madame” (207). Yet for Lagnado’s mother, “To compare someone to an Arab peasant was her most searing put-down” (228–29).

Liliane S. Dammond’s The Lost World of the Egyptian Jews: First Person Accounts from Egypt’s Jewish Community in the Twentieth Century offers numerous examples of these divergent and at times conflicting Egyptian Jewish identities. One woman, whose family of Greek descent lived in Alexandria, recalls, “In Egypt, we considered ourselves European. At home we all spoke French, sometimes English, but no Arabic. . . . There was no great need to speak Arabic” (65). In contrast, a woman with Syrian ancestors reports, “We always spoke Arabic at home” (260); “We lived like sisters and brothers with our Muslim neighbors” (263).

Most recently, Andre Aciman’s novel Harvard Square explores in detail the conflicted identity of a young Egyptian Jewish graduate student in the United States. Set in Cambridge, Massachusetts, during the summer and fall of 1977, ten years after the Six Day War and concurrent with Anwar Sadat’s historic visit to Israel, Harvard Square details the brief but intense friendship between its diffident graduate student narrator and a volatile and voluble Tunisian Muslim cabdriver named Kalaj. Viewing Kalaj as his “blood brother,” the narrator is drawn to him by their common North African background and affiliation to France (127). Yet he worries that their friendship might compromise his efforts to pass—as an American and as a PhD candidate—at Harvard, and he vacillates between fully embracing his Arab double and rejecting him. In the end, the desire to get ahead triumphs; even while feeling “unbearable shame and unbearable sorrow” (279), the narrator abandons his “dearest soul” (277) just on the verge of Kalaj’s deportation from the US. Clearly the narrator’s betrayal of Kalaj is a self-betrayal, yet it is the choice upon which his American identity is built. In this deeply disturbing novel, Aciman offers us a parable of assimilation, showing us the cost—and the reward—of an Egyptian Jewish American man’s decision not to acknowledge his Arab self.

Yet what Aciman’s novel does not reveal—and what none of the other Egyptian Jewish American works offer either—is the historical grounding for the conflicted identities they portray. Liliane Dammond’s collection of oral histories goes further than the memoirs and novels in offering a nuanced picture of Egyptian Jewish life in the early twentieth century, but the stories she transcribes are brief and fragmentary. For a full portrait of what Jacqueline
Kahanoff called “one of the most complex and interesting” (“Culture” 118) Jewish communities in the world, we must turn to her autobiographical novel *Jacob’s Ladder*. Devoted to telling “our own story, in our own words” (“Culture” 118), Kahanoff’s novel—published simultaneously in the US and in England—is the first full-length Egyptian Jewish work published in the United States, appearing well before the memoirs and novels produced by a later generation of Egyptian Jews, most of whose narratives are colored by their experiences of Arab nationalism and anti-Zionism in an Egypt transformed by the creation of Israel in 1948 and the Free Officers’ Revolution in Egypt in 1952.

Born in 1917 into an upper-middle-class Jewish family in Cairo, Jacqueline Kahanoff was educated at the French Mission Laique School in Cairo. Her primary language was French, though she acquired “an excellent command of English from her early exposure to the language at the hands of her British nanny and governess” (Starr and Somekh xiv). From an early age, she chafed against the limitations of her family’s “minority framework”; as a high school student, she was drawn to Marxism, aligning herself with Egyptian nationalism and striving “towards something universal” (“Childhood in Egypt” 11). In 1940, at the age of 22, she married and left Egypt for the US, “the gate to freedom,” hoping to be able to write “from afar” about the Egypt she both “loved and hated” (“Europe” 112). Kahanoff lived in the US for ten years, earning a master’s degree in journalism at Columbia University and studying at the New School. Although she had published a few sketches while an adolescent in Egypt, “it was in America that [she] received encouragement” (“Culture” 117), winning second prize in a short story contest sponsored by the *Atlantic Monthly* and earning a fellowship from Houghton Mifflin to complete *Jacob’s Ladder*. In 1954, after a few years in Paris, she moved to Israel, where she became known for her work celebrating Levantinism in opposition to mainstream Ashkenazi Israeli denigration of Sephardi/Mizrahi Jewish identity. Throughout her career, Kahanoff wrote in English, having her works translated into Hebrew for publication in Israel. She died of cancer in Israel in 1979, where, according to Deborah Starr and Sasson Somekh, the editors of an important collection of her writings, she continues to be considered an important public intellectual (xii–xiii)—although Shohat, in a private communication, reminds us that she was never seen as a critical or radical Mizrahi voice.

Kahanoff has been both praised and blamed for her formulation and promulgation of Levantine identity, defined as “a potentially successful cross-breed of two or more cultures . . . able to fuse elements of various civilizations into new dynamic patterns, characteristic of the Middle Eastern people”
Joyce Zonana

(“Ambivalent” 198). On the one hand, Ktsiaa Alon celebrates her for depicting “multiculturalism in all its glory,” and Ammiel Alcalay uses her as a key figure in his arguments for a native Arab Jewish identity in opposition to the “modern myth of the Jew as pariah, outsider, and wanderer” and the “postmodern myth of the Jews as ‘other’” (1). On the other hand, this very postulation of a Middle Eastern “space in which the Jew was native, not a stranger” (1) has been seen as authorizing Israeli Jewish colonialism vis-à-vis Palestinian Christians and Muslims. Gil Z. Hochberg, for example, claims that Kahanoff’s essays elide the Arabic language and thus her Arab identity, enabling her to become “a colonizing Israeli” despite her initial position in Israel as a “colonized Arab-Jew” (240); Starr and Somekh, even while making Kahanoff’s essays and short fiction available in English for the first time, fault her for a “disconnect from Arab culture” (xxv), and appear to dismiss Jacob’s Ladder as a work reflecting “an innocence, nostalgia, and touch of the exotic” (xix).

While I cannot hope to settle the debate about Kahanoff in this essay, what I hope to show is that her representation of native Middle Eastern Jewishness and Arabness is far more nuanced than both her advocates and her critics contend. A close reading of Jacob’s Ladder, which was published under her maiden name, Jacqueline Shohet, reveals a writer bravely struggling to come to terms with the contradictions within her society, exploring the self-division and even self-betrayal at its heart. Her autobiographical novel takes us deeply into the consciousness of a sensitive child working to make sense of her family, her city, her country, and her religion. And while most of the Egyptian Jewish American memoirs and fictions we have focus on the 1940s or the first decades after the Egyptian Revolution in 1952, supporting what Mark R. Cohen has called the “neo-lachrymose conception of Jewish-Arab history,” or what Shohat (Taboo Memories) previously termed the “master narrative of universal Jewish victimization” (215), Jacob’s Ladder offers an intimate look at Egypt between the two world wars, when the Jewish community flourished.

Kahanoff puts the issue of European versus Arab or Middle Eastern identity for the Jews of Egypt at the very center of her novel. The story she tells is not always a pretty one, revealing as it does the racism and elitism that marked certain portions of the Egyptian Jewish community in the early twentieth century. And Kahanoff paid the price for telling it. Writing in 1973, she recalls that Jacob’s Ladder upset her parents “immensely,” largely because it was so “sociologically honest” (“Culture” 118). As a consequence, she “never finished another book” (118). Out of print and completely obscure in the US—I could not find a single copy in any of New York City’s public or university
libraries and had to order my edition from a used bookseller in England—it has only recently (2014) been translated into Hebrew and published in Israel.

*Jacob’s Ladder* places us directly into the consciousness of an Egyptian Jewish girl, Rachel Gaon, following her from 1919, when she is five years old, until 1929, when she is fifteen. As such, it is a coming-of-age story, an autobiographical *Bildungsroman*, with all the virtues (directness, honesty) and many of the flaws (overwriting, shapelessness) of that genre. Rachel’s mother, Alice Smadja, is the daughter of a Jewish merchant from Tunis; her father, David Gaon, is the son of a Jewish merchant from Baghdad. In these particulars, Rachel’s family makeup echoes that of Kahanoff, whose maternal grandparents, the Chemlas, immigrated to Cairo from Tunisia, and whose paternal grandparents, the Shohets, came from Baghdad. The Smadjas and the Gaons, like the Chemlas and the Shohets, are typical of the many Jewish families who, in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, moved to Egypt from various places in the Ottoman Empire (along with smaller numbers from Europe and Russia), seeking economic opportunity and—in some cases—greater political freedom.

As numerous scholars have pointed out, three key factors transformed Egypt in the second half of the nineteenth century into “a new Eldorado” (Barda 75) especially welcoming to new immigrants: the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the British occupation of the country in 1882, and the rapid development of the cotton industry. Drawing on the work of Joel Beinin, Gudrun Kramer, Jacob Landau, and Michael Laskier, Rachel Barda estimates that while in 1798, at the time of Napoleon’s invasion, some six or seven thousand mostly indigenous Jews lived in Egypt, by 1882, after the *jizya* tax was abolished in 1855, thirty thousand Jews lived in the country. The numbers continued to increase dramatically: by 1918 there were sixty thousand, and in 1947, there were some seventy or seventy-five thousand (78). The influx of Jews to Egypt was part of a much larger wave of immigration: while there might have been 15,000 foreigners in Egypt in the 1850s, by the 1880s their numbers had grown to 100,000; after World War I, there were more than 200,000 (74).

What these new immigrants found in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egypt was a nation eager to modernize, turning to France and England for expertise and guidance. Muhammad Ali, who ruled the country from 1805 to 1849, had decreed “that all outward manifestations of xenophobia were to be suppressed” (Barda 74). Sumptuary laws and social restrictions governing minority groups were abolished, and foreigners were protected by his enforcement of the “capitulations,” ancient Ottoman regulations that gave special
Joyce Zonana

economic and legal privileges to foreigners. As Barda puts it, “for reasons of personal safety, economic privileges, and social standing, the status of foreigner became a very desirable commodity, and Jews and non-Jews alike sought it very actively” (74). In 1882, British troops arrived in Egypt, quashing a nationalist military rebellion that had sought to eliminate foreign influence in the country; from that point onward until after World War II, the country was in effect governed by Great Britain. Although the formal British Protectorate, established at the start of World War I in 1914, was abolished in 1922, the British still retained control of the Suez Canal, Sudan, and the military, assuming responsibility for the “protection” of foreigners and local minorities, including Jews (84). Thus, although Jews had long lived and flourished in Egypt, conditions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries encouraged the immigration of Jews from elsewhere, many of whom turned towards Europe for cultural identification.

While both sides of young Rachel’s family are Arabic-speaking Jews from the Ottoman Empire who moved to Cairo in the late nineteenth century in order to take advantage of its economic and social opportunities, Kahanoff draws sharp distinctions between the Tunisian and Baghdadi branches of the family, a distinction that at times collapses into a conflict between the child’s mother and father, and sometimes even into conventionally “feminine” and conventionally “masculine” ways of being in the world. Although Starr and Somekh claim that Rachel’s conflict with her British governess, Miss Nutting, is the “primary” conflict in the novel (xix), I argue that it is instead the conflict between the Smadjas and the Gaons, who represent two different ways of being Jewish in Egypt—one foreign or “European,” the other native Middle Eastern or “Arab.” The blue-eyed, fair-haired, and fair-skinned Tunisian Smadjas, living in Cairo’s elegant European downtown, are an emotional, voluble, sometimes chaotic, not particularly observant clan, descended from two brothers, Nathan and Joseph, who “had climbed out unaided from the squalor of the Tunisian mellah,” the walled Jewish quarter in Tunis (Jacob’s Ladder 24–25). In contrast, the dark-skinned, dark-eyed, dark-haired Gaons, severe and restrained in their adherence to Jewish tradition, live on a “narrow lane” in an older, more traditional Cairo neighborhood, a place steeped in “timelessness,” where “grave voices” exchange greetings of peace in Arabic, and where no woman—Jewish or Muslim—walks out in public without being draped in a habbara—a full-length robe and head covering (3).

Rachel’s maternal grandmother, Hnina, is descended from Italian Jews who settled in Tunis. Her grandfather Nathan (referred to by the Italian
And she loved brown people, “Nonino”), is a “florid” (22), affable man, a department store owner who enjoys an easy camaraderie with everyone he meets, and who throws the pits of olives—which he eats with relish—into the Chinese vases on the dining room sideboard. Yet Nathan’s youngest daughter, Sandra, at twelve, is already ashamed of her father.

When she married and had her own home, she would not allow people to do such things, nor to yell from one room to another. Throwing herself on her bed, she began to read a French novel, longing for the elegant world it described. (29–30)

Alice, Rachel’s mother, is Nathan’s oldest daughter. She, too, is “intoxicated by French culture” (“Culture” 123), returning from a visit to Paris with a “case of books” (Jacob’s Ladder 113), and often represented as avidly reading Proust.

While Nathan and his brother Joseph are illiterate, Alice and Sandra are the product of colonial French schools that shaped the values and aspirations of so many North Africans seeking admission into the middle classes of their countries. And although that education at times causes his daughters to be ashamed of him, Nathan—whose memory of the mellah remains vivid—supports their new refinements: “Why shouldn’t our children live like educated people?” he asks. “Did we give our girls a good schooling for them to live like Hara Jews?” (211). Nathan here uses the term hara—literally meaning ‘neighborhood’ in Arabic—as a stand-in for Haret-el-Yahud, the traditional Jewish neighborhood in Cairo, where many lower-class Jews still lived in the early twentieth-century.

In her portrayal of the Smadja family, Kahanoff is faithful to what is known about the Jews of Tunis. Toward the end of the novel, Rachel’s grandmother Hnina explains that in Tunis, there were three classes of Jews:

the Tunis, who are the natives, the Granas, who came from Spain long ago, and the Ghornayim, the most refined and wealthy, who were treated as Europeans, not as natives. They looked down upon the Tunis, although they do it less today, now that everyone gets a French education. (344)

Hnina’s classification of Tunisian Jews accords with what contemporary sociologists and historians have ascertained about the Twansa, with ancestors in Tunisia for centuries or millennia; the Grana, whose ancestors fled Spain or Portugal during the Inquisition; and the New Livournai, who arrived in the nineteenth century and were treated as Europeans (Walters 261–62). The
Twansa and the Grana tended to live in the gated mellah, “a crowded, miserable world cut off from a frightening exterior . . . in a universe apart, on the one hand rich and reassuring, based on an illusion of protection in its isolation, and on the other, deeply shameful, since it expressed the misery of its inhabitants” (Guy Degas, as cited in Barbe 110).

Albert Memmi, a Tunisian Jew born in 1920, has given us unforgettable images of what he has termed the “terrors of the ghetto” (94) in Tunis, images that help us to understand why Nathan Smadja and his daughters would want to distance themselves from it. Interestingly, Memmi uses the European term, “ghetto,” to name the mellah, although North African Jewish quarters did not typically conform to the European conception of the “ghetto.” Still, in his autobiographical novel The Pillar of Salt, Memmi writes of the mellah’s “offensive stink,” “foul fluids,” and “mountains of garbage where the sunlight hatched swarms of green and black flies” (20). More importantly, he details the devastating social consequences of coming from the mellah. Thus his fictional persona, Alexandre Mridakh Benichou, explains why he has dropped his Hebrew middle name:

In this country, Mridakh is as obstinately revealing as if one shouted out: “I’m a Jew!” More precisely: “My home is in the ghetto,” “my legal status is native African,” “I come from an Oriental background,” “I’m poor.” But I had learned to reject these four classifications. It would be easy to reproach me for this, and I have not failed to blame myself. But how is it possible not to be ashamed of one's condition when one has experienced scorn, mockery, or sympathy for it since childhood? (94)

What is crucial here is that Memmi’s protagonist disavows his “native” self not because of persecution by Muslims, but in the context of a French colonial society that has taught him to be ashamed of his origins. Similarly, Nathan Smadja rejects these four classifications—ghetto, native, Oriental, poor (we might add here “Arab”)—and works to give his daughters and grandchildren in Cairo the advantages he did not have in Tunis.

Chief among those advantages is the speaking of French rather than Arabic. Tunisia became a French colony in 1881, and by 1896 all education in Tunisia was conducted in French. But even before that, in 1878 and 1882 the Alliance Israélite Universelle established its first schools in Tunis for boys and girls, respectively. The Alliance Israélite Universelle, founded in Paris in 1860, had taken upon itself the task of promoting “the emancipation and the moral progress of Jews” around the world. As Keith Walters puts it, the AIU
represented what might be termed French Jewry’s *mission civilisatrice* with regard to their North African and Middle Eastern brothers and sisters. Members of the AIU saw North African Jews as being in need of civilizing in matters ranging from education to hygiene . . . and they used rhetoric not unlike that of the French colonial government when they commented on anything outside the West. (265)

Tunisian Jews—and particularly women—took readily to the education provided by the AIU, finding in the acquisition of French what Pierre Bourdieu has defined as symbolic, cultural, and even economic capital (Walters 271). Speaking French became one of the quickest ways out of the *mellah* of the mind. Again, as Rachel’s grandmother Hnina puts it, “now that everyone gets a French education” (*Jacob’s Ladder* 344), all Jews are less likely to be scorned.

In contrast to the Smadjas, Rachel’s paternal grandparents, Jacob and Hattouna Gaon, remain as proud speakers of “solemn Baghdad Arabic, with its mixture of ancient Persian words” (5). They dress in traditional Arab robes—Jacob in white cotton and Hattouna in gray silk—and husband and wife are never seen in the same room together. In the Gaon home, people eat with their hands, dipping “round flat wheel[s] of warm whole-wheat bread,” into bowls and scooping out the food (66). We may note the contrast here with Edward Said’s recollection of a “Europeanized Eastern Jew” at Cairo’s Victoria College who berates an Armenian boy for dipping his bread into gravy: “*Ne mange pas comme les Arabes*” (184). Struck by the severe grace and purity of her grandparents’ home and garden, “overflowing with jasmine and honeysuckle,” Rachel thinks of Jacob and Hattouna as a “king” and “queen” (*Jacob’s Ladder* 63). Writing about her own paternal grandparents in a later essay, Kahanoff recalls that they “were the only people I knew who were in total harmony with themselves, inwardly and outwardly, who accepted themselves as they were and did not want to be other than they were” (“Childhood” 4).

Indeed, as Joel Beinin writes in his “Foreword” to Nessim Rejwan’s *The Last Jews in Baghdad: Remembering a Lost Homeland*, “Nowhere were Jews more deeply rooted and culturally assimilated than in the Tigris-Euphrates valley,” where they lived for centuries in “profound . . . symbiosis” with their neighbors (xi). Rejwan’s memoir, with its celebration of Jewish life in Baghdad, stands in sharp opposition to Memmi’s recollections of life in Tunis. Calling early twentieth-century Baghdad a “Jewish city,” Rejwan insists that in Baghdad, “the Jew-Arab opposition we constantly encounter today was never used either in writing or in daily discourse” (7), and he demonstrates his thorough integration into the larger community’s life even while maintaining his Jewishness.
The Gaon sons—Moses, David, and Samuel—speak French, having been educated at the AIU school established in Baghdad in 1864. But because, as Beinin points out, “the Jewish communities in Baghdad rejected the Alliance’s policy of adopting French as the sole language of instruction” (xiii), they do not give up their first language, Arabic. Rachel’s father, David, having mastered the dialects of village chiefs throughout Egypt to whom he sells the imported textiles of the House of Gaon, remains more comfortable in Arabic than in French. Thus he worries about his ability to communicate with his daughter: “A native tongue was like a home, he thought sadly, and his Semitic heart lived in exile, unable to find the fitting French expression” (Jacob’s Ladder 12).

Unlike the Smadjas, recently emerged from the mellah and ashamed of their origins, the Gaons proudly look back to a long tradition of success in Baghdad, to a golden age when the Jews thrived under the caliphate. Their name, “Gaon,” which means “excellency” in Hebrew, is “the title accorded to the Jewish spiritual leaders and scholars who headed Talmudic academies that flourished, with lengthy interruptions, from the 7th to the 13th century in Babylonia and Palestine” (“Gaon”). Indeed, when she is twelve, Rachel learns from her father that:

The name “Gaon” was handed down from those who had founded in Baghdad the university to which Jews from all over the Diaspora came to receive instruction; thus they, the Gaons, had helped to preserve the unity of Israel. (Jacob’s Ladder 349)

Rachel contrasts the rich history of her father’s family with the French history inculcated by her teachers: “At school, she had been taught to say, ‘Nos ancetres les Gaulois’, and had had doubts about her ancestors because they were not Gauls” (349). Now she knows that “she would rather be a Gaon than a Gaul” (349). But this knowledge—like Frantz Fanon’s ability to break his identification with “the civilizing colonizer” after also having constantly recited “our ancestors the Gauls” (126) as a child—is hard-won.

Not surprisingly, the marriage between David Gaon and Alice Smadja is replete with tensions—tensions that begin even before the wedding. Vainly, Alice tries to keep herself from thinking about “the cultured young architect with whom she had been so nearly in love”; ruefully, she recalls that she had been “too shy, too proud, to wangle invitations to balls where she would have met him” (51). David, “handsome, generous, and kind,” reminds her of “Arabian Nights’ merchants,” while she would have preferred “princes of the Contes de Perrault” variety (51). In their daughter Rachel, Alice recognizes that
David has given her “something as fine as Hattouna’s Eastern brocades”; still, like a French couturier, she wants to fashion the child “into a model of Parisian elegance” (51) with European language and European manners. Although David insists that his own mother, Hattouna, without any formal education, has “manners, the only kind that matter” (116), Alice ignores him. “It’s that French literature which poisons our lives” (207), David remarks bitterly at one point.

When Rachel is five, at the opening of the novel, her parents travel to England for several months in order to negotiate between David’s father, Jacob, and his oldest son, Moses. In England, Alice feels “clumsy and unsure” (85) of herself, imagining that people are laughing at her. She resolves that her daughter must have an English nurse, and later an English governess, so that she will never experience the same discomfort. A French education is not enough: since the British are ruling Egypt and setting the standards for high culture, Alice wants her daughter to have “the best advantages,” in order to “defend [herself] in the modern world” (116). David protests, fearing that the entire family will be subject to “the contemptuous eyes of a stranger” (113), but Alice, enlisting the support of David’s brother, prevails. Their daughter, as if in illustration of Bourdieu’s concept of embodied cultural capital, will learn to “speak English without a trace of an English accent, without Arabic words creeping in” (170).

To Alice’s chagrin, and to the reader’s amused delight, the nurse she hires—Miss O’Brien, called “Nanny”—is Irish rather than English, and understandably less strict in enforcing British superiority to natives than Alice might wish. When Miss O’Brien first arrives in Egypt, she faithfully follows Alice’s instructions and the advice of the other nurses, keeping Rachel away from “all that smacked of native life” (167), covering her face with a veil and making sure that everything she touches is disinfected. For Rachel, who wants to “roam about, to talk to people” (165), “to see things in their real colours,” and to breathe “even the bad smell of animal droppings” (164), Nanny’s restrictions feel “like punishments, worse than being spanked or standing in a corner” (165).

To her credit, Miss O’Brien recognizes the cruelty of the regime she is responsible for enforcing, and eventually she tries to temper her employer’s demand, though she succeeds only in alienating Alice, preparing the way for her replacement by the very proper, very strict, and truly cruel English governess, Miss Nutting. The damage has been done. Under Nanny’s tutelage—and even more so under Miss Nutting—Rachel comes to see the world as divided into “pink” and “brown” people. The “pink” people who speak English are allied against the “brown,” among whom she counts herself and a young Egyptian
beggar with whom she has come to identify (167). Even as a child, Rachel recognizes that the distinction is not exactly about skin color, though she still uses it as a signifier for the contrasts she sees in her society.

Nonino and Aunt Renee’s skin were fairer than Nanny’s but it wasn’t the same thing, they must be brown inside, and she loved brown people, not the pink and pale ones. (167)

The “pink and pale ones” are the “governesses, British soldiers and policemen, neither man nor woman, but authority, discipline, jails, barracks, all that civilized the life out of people and turned them into joyless, well-behaved automatons” (359). Refusing to be ashamed of her brown, native self, Rachel resists, imagining “huge counter-crusades, during which her world invaded” the pink one, and “utterly destroyed it” (359).

These fantasies lead her to be pleased when she encounters rioters shouting “Independence! Freedom for Saad Zaghloul!” the leader of Egypt’s nationalist Wafd Party, demanding independence from Great Britain. She longs to “rush along with them, smashing things, even though her father had said blood would flow in the streets of Egypt if the British went away” (222). Later, braving the reproofs of her brother and Miss Nutting, she actually joins her voice to those of a group of rioters who are passing her Garden City home, throwing flowers and shouting with them, “Egypt for the Egyptians” (364).

Rachel’s healing antidote to the pink people who want to rule her and other Egyptians comes in the form of Amina, the Syrian Christian wet nurse Alice hires for her son Daniel, born when Rachel is seven. In Amina’s generous brown breasts and regal bearing, Rachel finds the maternal warmth and self-acceptance her own mother has failed to provide. Drawn to Amina’s “splendid abundance” (182), Rachel sits at her feet in quiet “adoration” (183). Amina, she decides, is “like the Arab women, like the rose and the jasmine” (184) that flower in her paternal grandparents’ garden. Amina becomes for Rachel a symbol of Egypt as nurturing mother—“um al-duniya, the ‘mother of the world’” (Ghosh 80)—capable of absorbing and reconciling all differences.

At the beach in Alexandria, Rachel succumbs to this fantasy of peace.

Amina and the beach were one. The soft warm sand was like the comfort of her breast . . . and the sea . . . was like a mother gathering her children. There was about the sea and beach the same mystery that radiated from Amina’s full brown body, and Rachel surrendered to the sensuous joy, snug against the sand, her eyes closed, lulled to half-sleep by the murmur of the waves. (Jacob’s Ladder 202)
Rachel’s “physical well-being” becomes transmuted into “a finer ecstasy” in which “all sounds blended into one harmony, all colors dissolved into light” (203).

Given Rachel’s identification with “brown” rather than “pink” people, with Egypt rather than with the occupying British, with Amina rather than with Alice, it is not surprising that her first Passover—the Jewish celebration of the ancient Hebrews’ departure from Egypt—should provoke complex feelings. Passover of course figures prominently in the memoirs and fictions of other Egyptian Jews. Jean Naggar recalls that as a privileged child in Egypt, she viewed the Haggadah as a “fairy tale” that “held no actual relevance” (49) for her. Still, she pointedly uses the ancient Hebrews’ trials in Egypt as a symbol for what happens to her own family during the Tripartite Invasion. In Out of Egypt, on the eve of his family’s reluctant departure from Alexandria in 1967, fourteen-year-old Andre Aciman refuses to read aloud from the Haggadah. When an aunt asks him, “What kind of Jews are we?” he answers bluntly: “The kind who don’t celebrate leaving Egypt when it’s the last thing they want to do” (333). Similarly, Lucette Lagnado—even while branding Nasser as a “modernday pharaoh” (259)—admits that “no matter how loudly we sang” during her exiled family’s Passover Seder in Brooklyn, “our holiday had become not a celebration of the Exodus from Egypt but the inverse—a longing to return to the place we were supposedly glad to have left” (263). In my own memoir, I write of my difficulty reconciling two images of Egypt: the “place of oppression and pain” fled by the ancient Hebrews or the place of “sunshine and ease” reluctantly left by my parents (Dream Homes 88). It is only Kahanoff who makes the deeper connection, refusing to separate Jewish from Egyptian suffering.

For Rachel, who celebrates her first Passover when she is eight at the home of her paternal grandparents, the holiday grants her entrance into both the past and the present of her Egyptian Jewish identity, creating a link between them. As she learns biblical history from her father in the days before the holiday, she marvels that “she, and so many in her family, bore the names of their ancestors, and were here, in this same Egypt where some of these events had occurred” (Jacob’s Ladder 231). Rachel lives the Passover story “not as a tale of long ago, but as a miracle which was happening to her here, now” (236).

Below her window flowed the River Nile, lined with the reeds among which Pharaoh’s daughter had found the baby Moses. From her window, she could see the Pyramids . . . [which] became the symbol of her people’s struggle . . . messengers of God’s word. (231)
Previously confused about her Jewish identity when trying to account for it among her Christian schoolmates, Rachel suddenly decides that she is “no longer sorry she was not a Catholic . . . for she knew that when the Messiah came, it would be for them all” (232).

Kahanoff sets Rachel’s first Passover at a time when Ramadan, Easter, and the Jewish holiday coincide. The Jewish festival becomes part of a citywide, even national celebration, a symbol of the possibilities of a unified, multiethnic, and multi-religious “Egypt for the Egyptians,” recalling her experience of ecstatic harmony at the beach:

In mosque, church, synagogue and home, each lived his own religious passion, but in the streets, people lived in a common frenzy, by which Egypt welded their diversity into a unity peculiar to itself. (235)

Feeling as if she “could burst from the wonder which flowed through her city” (235), Rachel mingles with the colorfully dressed crowds thronging the streets; she revels in the decorated market stalls “bent under the weight of holiday foods” and filling the air with the aromas of “roasting meat, frying cakes, fruit, spices, and bread fresh from the ovens” (234). In this way, Kahanoff makes of Rachel’s first Passover a feast of union rather than of separation, not so much about departure as about arrival. Yet the child Rachel cannot ignore the concrete message of the Haggadah, and—after her ecstatic identification with life in Misr—she is profoundly “shaken by the violence of the Passover ritual” (238). She suffers with the Egyptian firstborn smitten by God’s wrath and begs her father to answer her agonized question: “Is it wrong that I should love Egypt as my country?” (239).

That Rachel’s distress about the suffering of the ancient Egyptians was in fact Kahanoff’s is attested to by the fact that, throughout her writing career, Kahanoff returned again and again to the violence against the Egyptians inscribed and celebrated within the Passover liturgy. In “Such Is Rachel,” the award-winning short story she published in *Atlantic Monthly* in 1946, she puts her distress into the voice of her main character’s younger brother: “It’s horrible,” the boy tells his sister, “God couldn’t have done those things . . . it’s all so cruel” (29). Similarly, in an autobiographical essay published in 1959, Kahanoff recalls that as a child, she fantasized about the story having a different ending: “We and the Egyptians would be free together, and no one would set us against each other” (“Childhood” 7).

In “Passover in Egypt,” published in 1965, Kahanoff offers an extended nonfiction account of her response to her first Seder. She recounts how, before
the Seder, her father tells her the story of the ancient Hebrews in Egypt, and Kahanoff wonders:

Were the Arab Egyptians the same as those who lived in Pharaoh's time? They couldn't be, or the Jews would not have returned to Egypt. But if we had made peace, why did Jews still celebrate Passover and pray for the return to the Promised Land? I asked my father questions about it, but his answers weren't clear at all. (15)

Thinking about her friendship with Kadreya, a young Muslim girl, the young Kahanoff wonders: “Was Kadreya my enemy because she was an Egyptian? Or was it different now that Egyptians were Moslems?” (16). Kadreya, when told by Kahanoff the stories about the ancient Egyptians and the ancient Jews, refuses to believe her: “It's not possible,” she protests. “I swear that not my father, or his father, or my grandfather's grandfather would do such things to your father, his father, or his grandfather's grandfather. I love you; you are my friend” (16).

Kahanoff assures Kadreya that she loves her too, “but it's all written in a book called the Haggadah. Father also says Palestine is our Promised Land. So perhaps I'm not Egyptian like you” (16). Kadreya sobs, and Kahanoff is distraught. But when she actually attends the Seder, her distress intensifies: “I couldn't tell her about the Ten Plagues that had devastated Egypt. . . . I was also ashamed to tell her that we had returned to Egypt after we had reached the Promised Land” (18). Unable to speak, Kahanoff withdraws from the friendship.

In her very last published piece, “Welcome, Sadat,” Kahanoff once again highlights the significance of the Passover story for her sense of self, claiming that in her earlier representations of the holiday, she had failed fully to reveal the “anxiety, and even the terror” she had experienced in childhood (239).

Most people summon up the “Exodus from Egypt” once a year; I bore it within me every day of the year, riddled with doubts concerning the Lord’s grace and love. Why should innocent fellahin have to pay such a heavy price for the Hebrews to be set free, while it was certainly in the Lord’s power to demand of Pharaoh to listen to Moses and let the Hebrews go. It seemed to me that the matter was not only cruel but a huge waste. Ever since that first Seder I always made sure not to take part in the saying of the “Ten Plagues,” and when the time came to read out loud Dayenu I would pray silently, “Enough, that's really enough! If only such things would never happen again!” (240)
Viewing Anwar Sadat’s visit to Israel as the fulfillment of a dream, “that this time, in our own time, the end [of the Haggadah] would be different,” Kahanoff celebrates the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel and imagines that now “everything can start . . . anew” (242).

The conclusion of Jacob’s Ladder also represents a new beginning, embodied in a “huge Seder” (422) in which the Gaon and the Smadja families are united for the first time in the home of Rachel’s parents. In the days before the gathering, Alice, who has never hosted a Seder before, finds that she must turn to Ahmed, the Gaons’ longtime servant, for guidance. Because Alice is so flustered, it is fifteen-year-old Rachel who works steadily beside Ahmed, learning “from the old Moslem all that she as a Jewish woman needed to know” (424). The Seder is a great success, resembling, in Rachel’s mind, “a wedding feast, with its wine, its flowers, its promise of a life to come” (426).

But the groundwork for this wedding feast, the true marriage of David and Alice, the Gaon and Smadja ways of viewing the world, had been laid a bit earlier in the novel, during Rachel’s terrible bout with diphtheria. Wracked by fever and close to death, Rachel is anxiously watched over by her parents. To “help her to fight for her life” (335), David ventures in his halting French to tell his daughter the story of his family’s perilous journey by caravan across the desert from Baghdad, when Jacob was sixty. “You are also in our caravan,” David tells Rachel, “and one day you, too, must help to guide it and to protect it from all dangers as your grandfather did” (337). Immensely moved by her father’s narrative, Rachel is calmed, and at last able to sleep, her fever broken. That night she dreams of caravans, winding their way “to a pool of clear water, where the Messiah awaited them” (337).

In the hours that follow, Alice keeps vigil beside her daughter, also deeply moved by her husband’s story, which she has never heard before. She recognizes that it is David, “more than the doctor,” who has saved their daughter’s life, and she acknowledges that the child is “his.”

She felt something released in her as all the memories of her own childhood, so carefully locked away, flooded over her in a great rush, giving her back not the feeling of cramped, over-burdened days, but a sense of pride and richness in a duty well performed. (342)

The internalized shame of the mellah has given way, suddenly, to pride in her own history, her own Arab Jewish identity. When Rachel wakes, Alice, “as if impelled to recapture her own past” (342), begins to tell stories of her own childhood, singing an old Tunisian lullaby in Arabic to her daughter,
translating it for her and remarking that she “didn’t even know” (343) she remembered it. Rachel begs her to sing the sad song again, saying she prefers it to the French lullaby she heard as a baby.

Again, Alice is touched: “I was always a little afraid that you wouldn’t be interested in my life,” she confesses, and “might even stop loving me. I never thought you’d care about such things” (343). And then, in a moment of unguarded truthfulness, of complete self-acceptance, she calls Rachel “benti,” the Arabic endearment for “daughter”: “It was the first time that she heard the word benti cross her mother’s lips,” Rachel realizes, and she, too, is “deeply moved” (343). Now that she understands the “hardships of her mother’s childhood,” Rachel understands why her mother had turned her over to a British nanny and governess; instead of resenting her, she feels a “protective tenderness” (343). When her uncle brings her four little dolls from Palestine—“two Jewish Kibboutzniks, a man and a woman with little Russian blouses embroidered at the collar, and two Arab ones” (349)—she marries the Arab man to the Jewish woman and the Jewish man to the Arab woman. Her uncle calls her an “incorrigible dreamer” (349), but this is the dream, of a unified Arab-Jewish identity, unashamed and proud, that undergirds Jacob’s Ladder, and that makes it a stepping stone to a brighter vision than the ones that cloud our twenty-first century imaginations.
Works Cited


“And she loved brown people”  


“Sephardim since Birth”: Reconfiguring Jewish Identity in America

by Devin E. Naar

We are but Jews
and our title is Sephardim.
Never were we, nor did we think of being
anything but Sephardim since our birth.¹

Appealing to these lines, the final stanza of a poem published a century ago in the New York Ladino newspaper El Progresso, scholars have bolstered an argument that Jews from the Ottoman Empire arrived in the United States in the early twentieth century with an unequivocal and entrenched sense of themselves as “Sephardim.” In his Sephardim in Twentieth Century America, Joseph Papo, a Palestinian-born Jewish teacher and social worker who served as the executive director of the Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America (1944–47), asserted: “The 20th Century Sephardi immigrants arrived in New York from Turkey and the Balkans, conscious and proud of being Sepharadim Tehorim (Pure Sephardim)” (52). Other scholars have reinforced the notion that Ladino-speaking Jews retained “deep connections” to Spain through the ages and take for granted their self-identification with the term “Sephardim” in New York (Ben-Ur, Sephardic Jews in America 10). But if we examine the excerpted poem in its entirety—and not just the final stanza—it becomes immediately clear that, a century ago, Ladino-speaking Jews in the United States did not automatically describe themselves as “Sephardim.” Rather, the term “Sephardi,” as a self-imposed, collective, “ethnic” designation had to be learned and naturalized, and its
parameters defined and negotiated in the new context of the United States and in conversation with discussions about Sephardic identity across the globe.² The definition of the concept of “Sephardi” remains an on-going process that, as evidenced in the recent discussions in Spain and Portugal over the prospect of granting citizenship to Sephardic Jews with ancestry in Spain or Portugal, continues today.

The poem in question begins by describing an encounter between “a Jewish youth” from the Ottoman Empire and a Yiddish-speaking Jew on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The youth, wearing “peasant clothes” from the Ottoman Empire, attempts to explain who he is to the Yiddish speaker: “Oriental Jew,” “Spanish Jew,” “a Jew from Turkey,” and, in final desperation, “Jewish Oriental.” The Yiddish-speaker, however, rejects all of these descriptors as either historically implausible or undesirable. “Spanish” Jewry ceased to exist with the expulsion of 1492. In the context of intense anti-Asian sentiment in American public discourse, did the “Orient” refer to the Far East or the Near East? Moreover, “Turkey” evoked an image of the “Terrible Turk, scimitar-wielding, mustachioed, and befezzed” (Bali 25). The author of the poem, Salonican-born Joseph Saltiel, finally interjects: “Man, don't you know that the Americans do not get along with the Orientals/ seeing that they think we are Chinese/ or from Japan or that we wear fezzes?” The poem’s didactic conclusion, about being “Sephardim since birth,” then follows.

The poem demonstrates precisely that it was not self-evident for Jewish immigrants from the Ottoman Empire to conceive of themselves exclusively—or even necessarily—as Sephardim; the youth in the poem could not even come up with this term in his list of self-descriptors. The assertions that “we don't wear fezzes” and that we “have never been anything but Sephardim since our birth” reflected aspirations rather than an underlying social reality. The poem encapsulated the aims of a new campaign launched in the Ladino press in New York in 1915 that sought to naturalize the term “Sephardi” in the vocabulary of Ladino-speaking Jews—of all classes and geographic origins—in order to privilege it over other available self-designations. This “Sephardi campaign”—as the Ladino press called it—sought to provide readers with the idiom and intellectual tools necessary to present themselves to the American (Jewish) public and to themselves explicitly as “Sephardim,” authentic Jews and legitimate heirs of the legacy and grandeur of medieval Spanish Jewry. The campaign sought to make Jews “Sephardi” in the United States—to compel them both to perceive of and represent themselves as Sephardim “since birth.” This chapter is thus concerned with elaborating central threads of (and opposition to) this
Sephardi campaign, which aimed to reconfigure the components of what it had meant to be a “Jew” in the Ottoman Empire in a way that would effectively and favorably resonate with “mainstream” American Jewry.

MAINSTREAM AMERICAN JEWRY

The Ladino press in the Ottoman Empire during the late nineteenth century associated the term “Jew” with speaking Ladino, being Ottoman, Oriental, and, for the middle and upper classes, imbued with French culture that they acquired through the education they received from institutions such as the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle (Stein, “The Permeable Boundaries of Ottoman Jewry”; Making Jews Modern; Borovaya). “Sephardiness” may have been implied by the term “Jew,” but the term “Sephardi” itself was seldom employed in everyday discourse. Djidyo, djudyo, judio, and israelita appeared much more frequently in the Ladino press in the Ottoman Empire. Those Jews who departed the Ottoman Empire and arrived in the United States quickly realized that none of the primary concepts that underpinned their sense of “Jewishness” were built into the definition of “Jew” in the new world. Especially in places like New York, “Jews” referred largely to those of Eastern European provenance who spoke Yiddish and evinced Yiddishkeit. Yiddish-speaking Jewry symbolically stood for all American Jewry at this time (e. g., Howe xix).

Part of the issue was demographic. Between the turn of the century and 1924, when the United States Immigration Restriction Act came into effect, as many as sixty thousand Jews from the Ottoman Empire and its successor states immigrated to the United States (Ben-Ur, Sephardic Jews in America 193–96). While most spoke Ladino, some spoke Arabic or Greek. In any case, they constituted a small minority in comparison to the more than two million predominantly Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe who came to represent “mainstream” American Jewry. The American Ladino press frequently referred to “mainstream” American Jews as Ashkenazim or as Yiddishim, the latter a recognition of the primacy of their language in shaping their collective identity.

Within this context, Jewish immigrants from Ottoman territories expressed serious anxieties about those whom they perceived to be “mainstream” American Jews, who often called into question the new-comers’ Jewish identity due to differing geographic origins, culture, appearance, names, and perhaps most significantly, language. As one satirist recalled, “How could you be a
Jew when you looked like an Italian, spoke Spanish, and never saw a matzoh ball in your life?” (Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America* 108). Jews from the Ottoman Empire went to great lengths to “prove” that they were Jews to potential Ashkenazi employers or landlords by reading from Hebrew prayer books, showing the Hebrew fonts of the Ladino newspapers, displaying their prayer shawls and phylacteries, or even revealing their circumcisions (108–49). Even when the Yiddish paper *Der Führer* carried an article on the newcomers from the Eastern Mediterranean in 1915 and recognized them as Jews, the newspaper portrayed them as peculiar, backward, disunited, dishonest, uneducated, impoverished, miserable, and oriental (“El artículo publicado”). Other sensationalist journalistic accounts depicted bearded “Turkish Jews” wearing fezzes and ready to shine shoes for two cents (“In New York Is a City Set Apart”). These kinds of journalistic accounts appeared throughout the 1910s and 1920s and provoked controversy each time. Even Judah Magnes, the president of the New York Jewish Community (*Kehillah*), expressed little interest in the affairs of the “Oriental Jews.” While he hoped that “some way may be found of bringing about greater harmony and more united activity on behalf of the Jewish cause” (“Nuestro movimiento komunal”), he did not offer any suggestions as to how to accomplish this goal. Although it soon became clear to Ladino-speaking Jews in the United States that terms such as “Ottoman,” “Turkish,” “Oriental,” and “Levantine” carried with them negative connotations, they had begun to develop their own cultural and institutional life with these categories in mind. Within this context, their most immediate frame of reference was not Spain, but rather the Ottoman Empire.

**BECOMING OTTOMAN JEWS**

While Jews in the Ottoman Empire did not always recall ancestral or cultural links to Spain, they increasingly conceived of themselves as part and parcel of the Ottoman Empire, especially over the course of the nineteenth century. The absence of an undisputed awareness of their ostensible links to Spain becomes clear through the ways in which Jews in the Ottoman Empire described themselves and their language. In one of the most important works of Ladino literature, *Guerta de Oro* (1778), the Sarajevo-born merchant residing in Livorno, David Attias, referred to his intended Jewish readers in the Ottoman Empire primarily as *levantinos* (“Levantines,” i.e., “Easterners”). At the same time, he
sought to convince them to consider themselves “Spanish” because “originally our forefathers came from Spain or Portugal” (Bunis, “The Changing Faces of Sephardic Identity”). The fact that Attias had to make this point demonstrates the extent to which his readers may not have been aware of this “fact” and obviously did not think of themselves as “Spanish” even if they may have identified their liturgical customs as constituting the “Sephardic rite.”

Furthermore, Jews in the Ottoman Empire primarily understood their spoken language to be a marker of “Jewish” rather than “Spanish” identity. They frequently referred to their vernacular as judezmo or djudyo. Both terms signify the “Jewish” character of the language, just as Yiddish means “Jewish” in Yiddish (Bunis, “Native Designations of Judezmo”). The fact that Jews in the Ottoman Empire continued to speak a Spanish-based language did not result from a sense of cultural allegiance to Spain, but rather, to the contrary, due to the structure of the Ottoman Empire. The sultan granted non-Muslims populations (namely Jews and Christians) communal autonomy and did not compel them to adopt any particular language, but rather permitted them to use that which each community pleased, so long as they paid their taxes and did not revolt (Rodrique, interview; Barkey). Within this framework, the Ottoman state referred to the Jews’ spoken language as Yahudice (“Jewish”), not Spanish (Ortayli). The perception of the language as distinctly “Jewish” even emerged in humorous contexts. When Argentine cinema arrived in Balkans in the early twentieth century, those Jews who flocked to the theater believed that they were viewing “Jewish” films because all of the actors appeared to speak “Jewish,” a term they used to identify Argentine Spanish (Bunis, Voices from Jewish Salonica 66–67).

Rather than encourage the Jewish masses in the Ottoman Empire to consider themselves as being indelibly connected to Spain, Ottoman Jewish leaders in the nineteenth century undertook an extensive and delicate project to transform their community members into loyal Ottoman patriots. From 1839 to 1876, the Ottoman government instituted a series of reforms, known as the Tanzimat, which sought to turn Ottoman “subjects” into “citizens” by guaranteeing equality with regard to property rights, education, government appointments and the administration of justice for all Ottomans regardless of communal affiliation (Jewish, Christian or Muslim) (Davison; Hanioğlu 72–108; Campos; Deringil; Cohen, Becoming Ottomans). Benefitting from these new opportunities, Ottoman Jewish elite sought to solidify their position within the Ottoman realm, opposed Zionism or any other political ideology that threatened to undermine the territorial integrity of the empire, and soon
became recognized as en sadık millet (“the most loyal community”) from the perspective of the Ottoman authorities (Avigdor Levy; Rodrigue; Cohen, Becoming Ottomans).

Celebrations organized in the major communities of Istanbul, Salonica, and Izmir in 1892 to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of 1492 significantly contributed to Ottoman Jews’ sense of connection and loyalty to the Ottoman Empire. This was the first occasion that Jews in the Ottoman Empire marked the anniversary of 1492, and they did so in a fascinating manner. Rather than lament the expulsion of their ancestors from Spain, Ottoman Jewish leaders celebrated their arrival in the Ottoman realm and the warm welcome and refuge provided by the sultan (Cohen, Becoming Ottomans 45–73). Promoting the incorporation of Jews into the Ottoman polity, those Jewish leaders who orchestrated the 1892 celebrations invoked Spain not to convince the empire’s Jews to consider themselves “Spanish” or “Sephardic,” but rather to fashion them into loyal Ottoman patriots. The increasingly imbedded status of Jews in their Ottoman environment also emerged clearly in several late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century illuminated Jewish wedding contracts (ketubboth) that integrated distinctly Ottoman imagery, such as the tughrā (the seal of the sultan) and the star and crescent—ostensibly Islamic symbols—into otherwise Jewish motifs (Ketubboth from Tekirdağ).

A sense that Jews from the Ottoman Empire identified closely with their empire of origin also became apparent for those who travelled to the United States. Some of the first Ottoman Jews who came to the United States as merchants representing the sultan at the major worlds fairs in Chicago (1893), St. Louis (1904), and Portland (1905) where they showcased “Oriental” goods, such as rugs, tobacco products, or delicacies such as Turkish delights (Bali 69–89). At the Chicago fair, in particular, Jews accounted for four-fifths of the Ottoman entourage and helped install a mosque as part of the “Turkish village” where they exhibited their wares (69–89). It was also in this mosque where the Jewish representatives of the Ottoman Empire held Yom Kippur services (Cohen, “Oriental by Design”).

While some of the first Ottoman Jews who arrived in the United States at the close of the nineteenth century served as representatives of the sultan, the increasing numbers of Jews from the Eastern Mediterranean who migrated to America during the early twentieth century also continued to link themselves to their empire of origin. The early New York Ladino newspapers, first established in 1910, initially favored the designation Turkino to refer to their readers. The term Turkino explicitly evoked connections to the Ottoman Empire (or
“Turkey,” as the empire was colloquially called). The term Turkino had entered public discourse in the context of the nineteenth century Ottoman imperial reforms. The 1860 translation of the Ottoman Imperial Penal Code rendered the Ottoman Turkish phrase teba-yı devlet-i âliyye (“subjects of the Sublime State”) into Ladino as suditos Turkinos: “Ottoman subjects” or “citizens” regardless of religion (Naar, “Turkinos beyond the Empire”). In the context of the United States, the term Turkino acquired a more specific resonance and referred specifically to Jews from Ottoman and former Ottoman territories. The Ladino press used the expression, la kolonia Turkina—the “Turkino colony”—to refer to the constituencies of Ottoman-born Jews settled throughout America who saw themselves as forming outposts—indeed, colonies—intimately linked to their Ottoman homeland. When the first Ottoman-born Jew in Seattle, which until World War I was home to the second largest kolonia after New York, gained American citizenship, the headline in the New York Ladino newspaper ran: El primer sudito Amerikano Turkino en Siatli (“The First Ottoman Jewish American Citizen in Seattle”).

ORIENTAL, LEVANTINE AND BALKAN

As evidenced by the Jewish youth from the Ottoman Empire featured in the above-mentioned poem who appealed to the labels “Jew-Oriental” and “Oriental-Jew” as his first and last attempts to define himself, Turkinos in the United States often referred to themselves initially and unproblematically with reference to labels such as “Oriental.” They understood the “Orient,” like the term “Levant,” to describe the general regions from which they came, but did not conceive of them as homelands in the ways that some of them imagined the Ottoman Empire. Like the term Turkino, the term “Oriental” initially garnered favor among some Jewish migrants in America from the Eastern Mediterranean although they soon recognized its ambiguous meanings and deprecatory connotations and sought to distance themselves from them.

The term was most prominently featured in the title of the Federation of Oriental Jews, established in New York in 1911. The Federation, which interfaced with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, sought to provide a framework for Jewish mutual aid associations established by Jews from different hometowns and aimed to improve the “industrial, social and educational conditions” of the “Oriental Jews in the United States of America” (Stein and

I believe “Oriental” is the appropriate term. I feel proud to be classed with Hindus and Chinese and Japanese and other Asiatics. Besides the name reminds us of dear Turkey, to whom we owe so much gratitude and love for protecting us when the civilized countries were oppressing us. The word Levantine may be more accurate, but “Oriental” expresses the Turkish Jew, and we are nothing but Turkish Jews; although we have passed under the dominion of other countries, we still have the old characteristics. . . . The Oriental Jew never drinks; first as a Jew, and then as a Turk, he is forbidden; his ethical standard is both Eastern and Jewish, and this means something. In morals the people of the East are inferior to none. (Stein and Cohen 343)

As with the term Turkino, for Gedalecia, the term Oriental evoked a link to the Ottoman Empire (“Turkey”) for which he expressed pride. Such a claim sought to counter the prevalent American public and diplomatic discourse that often evoked the image of the “Terrible Turk,” and the despotic rule of the “Sick Man of Europe.” “Levantine” may have appeared more precise in terms of geography (with the term “Levant” referring specifically to the Eastern Mediterranean). Gedalecia, however, boldly expressed satisfaction with the title of “Oriental” that counted him among Asian immigrants despite the extensive immigration restriction measures aimed against them, most detrimentally, the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882).

Although some Jews from the Eastern Mediterranean such as Gedalecia took pride in designations like “Oriental,” others insisted on these terms precisely in order to emphasize that the term “Sephardi” should not apply to the newcomers from the sultan’s realm. The well-known Rabbi David de Sola Pool, the reverend of Shearith Israel, the famous Spanish and Portuguese synagogue on the Upper West Side of Manhattan whose founding families had lived in America since colonial times, argued that the newcomers ought to be labeled “Levantine,” rather than “Oriental” (which connoted, from his perspective, the “Far East”). He also appealed to the term “Balkan”—a term that ostensibly invokes a geographic reference point, but one that also implies the mysterious, uncivilized borderlands between East and West—to refer to those Jews from Southeastern Europe (Todorova). “The Balkan Jew is a man without needs,” wrote de Sola Pool as he drew on stereotypical tropes. “He lacks even the energy and the intense ambition which animates even the poorest Eastern [European] Jews. The striving to better his lot is not very powerful. For
this reason, emigration is comparatively slight” (202; cf. Papo 51–64; Ben-Ur, Sephardic Jews in America 81–107; Stein and Cohen 328–30).

De Sola Pool and others from Shearith Israel insisted on terms such as Levantine, Oriental, or Balkan for political reasons, in order to distance themselves from the recently-arriving immigrants, and to reserve the term “Sephardi” for themselves as the true, uncorrupted, non-Oriental, upper-class descendants of the Jews of Spain and Portugal to whom the term “Sephardi” was intended to apply. The two constituencies eventually began to build bridges due to mutual need: the newcomers needed help adjusting to the new setting of America, and the Upper West Side dwellers needed the demographic weight of the new arrivals for the perpetuation of a viable “Sephardic” community of any kind. By the 1920s, the publications of Congregation Shearith Israel began to use the term “Sephardic” to refer to both groups.

While the decision to consider the newcomers from the Ottoman Empire within the umbrella category of “Sephardim” constituted a major change for the leadership of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue, the appeals to “Spanish” and “Sephardi” discourse also represented a rupture from the rhetoric employed on the pages of Ladino newspapers in the Ottoman Empire and even in the early American Ladino press. The “Sephardi campaign” overturned earlier efforts by Jewish journalists in the Ottoman Empire to fashion their community members into Ottoman imperial citizens during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also upended the established patterns of self-identification as contributors to the American Ladino press recognized the demeaning connotations of terms like “Ottoman,” “Turkish,” “Oriental,” “Levantine,” or “Balkan,” as used in American public discourse. The Ottoman Empire’s entry into the Great War on the side of the Central Powers provided further incentive for Ottoman-born Jews to distance themselves from their country and region of birth.

“SEPHARDIM BUT NOT ORIENTALS”

In seeking to transform their image and improve their reputation within the context of American and American Jewish society, contributors to the American Ladino press discovered that the term “Sephardi” resonated favorably with mainstream American Jewry. By recasting themselves as “Sephardim” through the “crowning” (enkronamiento)—as they called it—of the term Sephardi over
the term Oriental or Turkino (or the other designations), Ladino journalists believed that they could successfully legitimize themselves in the eyes of mainstream American Jewry, overturn Orientalist stereotypes of themselves, and accept the challenge of Judah Magnes to engage in more united activity on behalf of “the Jewish cause.” It is no surprise that Moise Gadol, the editor of New York’s first Ladino weekly, La America, served as a main architect of the Sephardi campaign, and promoted his Zionist political orientation to advocate for the unity of the Jewish people. He sought to solidify collective identification as “Sephardim” as one of the two constitutive branches of world Jewry (the other being the “Ashkenazim”).

Proponents of the Sephardi campaign could also draw on the increased resonance of the term “Sephardi” and the noble and elite status it implied as explicated in early studies of American Jewish ethnography and anthropology that relied upon pseudo-scientific theories of race. In his 1911 book, The Jews: A Study of Race and the Environment, Maurice Fishberg sought to counter nativist efforts to curtail the number of Jewish immigrants admitted into the country by defending Jews against accusations that they were inferior to the white race (Goldstein 110–15). Within his discussion of Jewish “race,” Fishberg explained that between the two groups of Jews, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, the latter “are very proud, and consider themselves as that branch of Israel which has succeeded in maintaining itself in its original Semitic purity, and has not suffered foreign intrusion as the Ashkenzim” (107–08). At the same time, Fishberg indicated that the “Spanish traits” the Sephardic Jews acquired through intermixing with their neighbors in Spain gave them a sense of pride, dignity, and superiority (110). The “Sephardi type,” Fishberg suggested, constituted the “ideal Jewish type,” which preserved “the traditional Semitic beauty, which in women often assumes an exquisite nobility.” Continuing with racialized rhetoric, Fishberg surmised that the “brilliant, radiant eyes” gave Sephardim their “reputation for bewitching elegance and charm. The Spanish and Andalusian women are said by some to owe their charms to these beautiful eyes, which are alleged to have their origin in the small quantities of Semitic blood which flows in their veins” (108–11).

While racialized tropes about Sephardic “superiority” had not formed part of the discourse among Jews in the Ottoman Empire, this kind of rhetoric did seem to inform the ways in which Spanish and Portuguese Jews connected to Congregation Shearith Israel had come to conceptualize themselves. Proponents of the Sephardi campaign in the Ladino press recognized that the term “Sephardi” as evoked by the leaders of Congregation Shearith Israel and
as explicated in anthropological literature could be harnessed to their advantage by claiming the designation and its associated characteristics for themselves, too. The “crowning” of the term “Sephardi” in place of “Oriental” on the masthead of Gadol’s newspaper, *La America*, constituted the first success of the Sephardi campaign. The title changed from the “organ of the Judeo-Oriental colony of America” to the “organ of the Judeo-Sefaradi colony of America” in October 1915. In order to justify this semantic shift, contributors to the Ladino press wove together and transformed a variety of discourses, most significantly: the scholarship of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (“Scientific Study of Judaism”) as expressed in Heinrich Graetz’s famous *History of the Jews*; a movement of “philo-Sephardism” promoted by Spanish politician Angel Pulido; and the exceptional status of the city of Salonica, once home to largest and most prosperous Ladino-speaking community in the world.

As the most widely read Jewish history of the era, Heinrich Graetz’s *History of the Jews* was translated from German into French, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Russian prior to the close of the nineteenth century and shaped how Jews across the globe conceptualized their history from ancient to modern times (Blutinger 133–64; Brenner 73–82). Graetz’s work already attained wide repute in America since its translation into English in the 1890s (Grayzel). Back in the Ottoman Empire, the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle incorporated the French translation into the curriculum when it introduced the study of Jewish history in 1892-93 (Rodrigue, *French Jews* 83–85). *El Messeret* in Izmir even translated selections of Graetz’s history into Ladino in 1897 (Benbassa and Rodrigue 110). With an awareness of the popularity of Graetz’s historical narrative, the editor of *La America* began printing his own “adaptation” of Graetz’s *History of the Jews* in installments in February of 1915 (“La historia del pueblo judío”). The manner in which Graetz’s work contributed to the “Sephardi mystique” by celebrating the intellectual, economic and cultural exploits of figures such as Maimonides and Ibn Shaprut during the medieval “golden age” of *Sefarad* now provided tools with which contributors to the Ladino press in America could redefine the contours of “Sephardi” identification in the United States.

An editorial entitled, “Sephardim but Not Orientals,” published in *La America* in October 1915, explicitly located its first appeal and “proof” for the legitimacy of the terminological shift in the masthead of *La America* from “Oriental” to “Sephardi” in Graetz’s *History of the Jews*. It is significant that rather than refer to an authority within the textual tradition among Jews in the Ottoman Empire in order to justify the validity of the use of the term
“Sephardi” as a self-designation, the author of the editorial, Bension Behar, appealed first to Graetz. After describing his personal observations about how the term “Oriental” evoked disdain among the American public and concluding that it should be understood as a “false name given to us without reason,” Behar appealed to Graetz: “The celebrated historian Graetz, in all of his accounts of Jewish history during the period of galut [exile] tells of the glorious acts of our ancient ancestors in Spain like: Yehuda Ha-Levi, Ibn Ezra, Rambam, Ibn Gabirol. . . . [History] calls them ‘the Sephardim’ (Spaniards)” (Behar). The fact that external—and therefore “objective”—sources set the terms of this “Sephardi” identity served as a legitimizing factor: i.e., both Graetz and “History” called “our ancient ancestors” Sephardim. Remarkably, the fact that Behar felt compelled both to place in quotes and to gloss the term “the Sephardim” indicates the extent to which he surmised his intended readers would not be familiar with his usage of the term and its explicit link to Spain.

Furthermore, Behar expanded the definition of “Sephardim” to include not only his “ancient ancestors” but himself and his contemporaries, as well. Behar’s definition of Sephardi implied that the grandeur of the Sephardi Jews continued in the “Orient” to the present day, and, in so doing, remarkably overturned Graetz’s descriptions in History of the Jews. While Graetz elevated the status of Jews in medieval Spain and declared them the first to achieve status as “Europeans,” he did not claim that their descendants in Ottoman lands preserved the admirable characteristics of their ancestors. In contrast, rather than continue to refer to “Spanish Jews,” he referred to “Turkish Jews” in the Ottoman Empire. According to Graetz, within the context of the allegedly backwards Orient, “The glory of the Turkish Jews was extinguished like a meteor, and plunged into utter darkness” (Graetz 4.630). In Graetz’s interpretation, not only did “Turkish Jews” lose their glory, but also they no longer deserved to be included in his narrative. Excised from his account altogether after the seventeenth century, Graetz re-introduces them as “Asiatic Jews”—yet another semantic shift and “downgrade”—who fall victim to the Damascus blood libel of 1840 (Graetz 5.663; Naar, “Fashioning the ‘Mother of Israel’”).

In order to overcome this negative portrayal and to demonstrate continuity between the great medieval Spanish Jews and their descendants in the Ottoman realm, Behar rewrote the narrative. He disassociated his constituencies from the Orient by naturalizing them in the West, and by recasting Spain, rather than the Ottoman Empire, as their authentic homeland. “The Spanish language and the land of Spain,” Behar asserted, “are not Oriental and similarly the official language in Turkey is not Spanish. And we who arrived here [to
the United States], immigrants from Turkey, were there [in Turkey] merely as guests for 400 hundred years” (Behar). The author thus sought to present these Jews as from Spain, speaking “Spanish,” and having sojourned in “Turkey” without becoming part of the local society, and thus remaining outside the negative “Oriental” characteristics assumed to be prevalent in their surrounding environment. Despite his claims that Jews in the Ottoman Empire spoke “Spanish,” Behar ironically utilized the Turkish-derived term for “guests” (musafires) and thereby unwittingly offered evidence that Jews in Ottoman lands actually absorbed linguistic elements from their neighbors even if he outwardly denied this very phenomenon.

In addition to appealing to and revising the scholarship of Heinrich Graetz, promoters of the “Sephardic campaign” also drew on another source external to their own tradition in support of their agenda: Spanish political discourse. A campaign of “Philo-Sephardism” launched at the start of the twentieth century by Spanish politician Angel Pulido provided contributors to the “Sephardi campaign” in New York in 1915 with further “objective” proof for their “Sephardi” and thus “Spanish”—rather than Oriental—character. In his campaign, Pulido sought rapprochement between Spain and those whom he characterized as “Spaniards without a homeland” (Españoles sin patria, the title of his 1905 book)—i.e., the descendants of the Jews expelled in 1492 who dwelt throughout the “Orient” and whom Pulido “discovered” while aboard a cruise ship on the Danube River. Pulido developed an argument that the decline of the Spanish empire—most recently the loss of Spain’s American colonies in 1898—could be traced back in part to the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, which constituted an “excision from the Spanish national body.” At the core of Pulido’s thought was a concept of racial heterogeneity: Jews had provided strength to the Spanish nation, and now, more than four hundred years later, they could again—at least insofar as they represented an untapped commercial market in the Levant. These sentiments ultimately led the government of General Primo de Rivera to pass a decree in 1924 that allowed Sephardic Jews to claim Spanish citizenship or consular protection within a period of six years and with other restrictions. While several hundred Jewish merchants in places like Salonica gained consular protection, which offered economic benefits, very few “returned” to Spain at the time (Avni).

Reimagining the Jewish vernacular of the Ottoman Empire as a form of “Spanish” served the interests of those promoting the Sephardi campaign. Just as Pulido sought to “reawaken” connections to Ladino-speaking Jews whom he hoped to incorporate into a new Spanish imperial enterprise in the
Eastern Mediterranean, Ladino-speaking Jews also took advantage of Pulido’s arguments and mythologies to legitimize their own claims to “Spanish” affiliation. The New York Ladino newspaper, La Bos del Pueblo, quoted a letter to this effect signed by Pulido in favor of “Sephardi Jews” (djidios sefaradim) during World War I: “Despite being dispersed from their former homeland [vieja patria], Spain did not forget the Sephardim, and they did not forget Spain, but rather continue to call themselves Spaniards and religiously conserve the customs and traditions like long-lost members of the Spanish family who are established in foreign lands. . . .” (El editor). The editor provided commentary: “This is another proof to overturn the arguments of those who believe that we are not Spanish Jews. When we ourselves as well as Spain consider us as such, who can have the audacity to deny it?” In this discussion, Spain rather than the Ottoman Empire emerged as the “former homeland,” and the subjects of the discussion were understood to be neither Ottoman, Turkino, Oriental, Levantine, or Balkan Jews, but rather “Sephardim” and “Spanish Jews.”

The challenge remained for Ladino-speaking Jews of the early twentieth century to link themselves to the grandeur of medieval Spanish Jewry. Even when Jews of the Ottoman Empire were accepted as the descendants of medieval Spanish Jews, a perception remained that, at best, they represented “fallen Sephardim” who did not preserve the cultural legacy of their ancestors (Ben-Ur, Sephardic Jews in America 129–32). In order to counter arguments about cultural discontinuity, supporters of the Sephardi campaign elevated the status of the city of Salonica, once home to the most dynamic Ladino-speaking community in the world, and held it up as an exceptional case that unquestionably demonstrated the link with Spain and with European civilization, more broadly.

La America cultivated a particularly complementary image of Salonica and of Salonican Jewry. “The Jew of Salonica is developed, intelligent, a man of culture and taste,” La America’s editor Gadol wrote in 1915. “The city [of Salonica], thanks to them [the Jews], really has the character of a European city, in the fullest sense of the word [European]” (“La emigrasion de Salonik”). Gadol’s praise for the Jews of Salonica persisted in the American setting. He highlighted the exceptional standing of the Salonican Brotherhood of America, the largest mutual aid society of Ladino-speaking Jews in America. “Composed of a well-enlightened element,” the Brotherhood, according to Gadol, promoted the “moral” and “material” progress of its members in addition to offering healthcare and burial services common to all immigrant associations.
Gadol further indicated that Salonican Jews displayed a “progressive” stance because the Brotherhood invited all those interested to attend its annual meetings, unlike other associations, which met behind closed doors (“La Ermandad Salonikiota en New York”; “El progreso de la Ermandad Salonikiota”).

Contributors to the Ladino press further harnessed images of the economic prowess and cultural distinctiveness of the Jews of Salonica to provide a further link to medieval Spain. For example, in an article published in 1916 in the *Jewish Immigration Bulletin*, the author conceded that in Salonica, the “conditions of living are somewhat better, but in general the situation of the Oriental Jew is miserable” (Auerbach, “The Levantine Jew”). In response, the Salonican-born journalist and lawyer Shimon Nessim provided a litany of statistics, drawn from the National Almanac of the Jewish Hospital of Salonica, to indicate that Jews predominated in almost every industry in Salonica. He concluded that the situation of the Jews in Salonica was not only “somewhat better” than those in other communities, but rather, “we see that the Jew of Salonica is much more capable than the peoples [puevlos] that surround him” (“Sefaradim-Orientales”). Nessim argued that not only were Jews in Salonica more successful than other Jewish communities in the region, but also more advanced than either Turks or Greeks.

Shimon’s brother, Maurice Nessim, also a journalist, similarly appealed to the case of his native city in order to establish the link between medieval Spain and the present. This particular debate circled around the alleged character of “Oriental” Jewish women as described in another journalistic expose. The article argued, “the Oriental women in New York pretend to be Spanish, when correctly they are nothing but Turkish Jews.” Seeking to overturn this claim, Maurice Nessim drew on evidence from his native city: “The very authentic dress of the women of Salonica, the kofiya, is the ancient dress of Castile, Spain” (cf. Juhasz). To his point about clothing, Nessim added that Jewish women in Salonica continued to sing the Spanish romansas they brought with them from Spain. Furthermore, he argued, Jews in Salonica regarded themselves to be the “direct descendants of the Jews who suffered exile [egzilo] from Spain.” The fact that the names of their synagogues recalled places in Spain provided further evidence of this point. Nessim hoped that the example of the Jews of Salonica, and especially the city’s Jewish women, would provide the necessary evidence to demonstrate that their character should be properly understood as “Spanish” rather than “Oriental” (“Protestasion de Maurice Nessim”).
THE SEPHARDI CAMPAIGN: RESISTANCE AND RECONCILIATION

The Sephardi campaign not only sought to recast Ottoman, Oriental, and Levantine Jews as “Spanish” and “Sephardi,” but also sought to displace another set of self-designations involving local, town-based identifiers, such as Selanikli, Izmirli, Rhodesli. Local designation was likely the most entrenched, most obvious method of self-identification. Like many immigrants in the United States, including Yiddish-speaking Jews who established an array of Landsmanschaft organizations, Ladino-speaking Jews initially organized themselves into mutual aid societies according to town of origin. Whereas the “crowning” of Sephardi in place of terms such as “Oriental” came more readily, the substitution of the term “Sephardi” for city-based labels met considerable resistance. In addition to resisting the name change due to local attachments, other Ladino-speaking Jewish leaders in New York opposed the Sephardi campaign because they objected to the Zionist leanings of its main promoters. The conclusion of World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire ultimately resulted in reconciliation among the various factions debating the merits of the Sephardi campaign, whose proponents secured a number of victories and established a “pan-Sephardic” taxonomy.

In terms of city-based affiliations, groups from Salonica, Adrianople, Rodosto, Silivria, and Chorlou founded their own societies in 1915 and reinforced local identities at the same time that the movement launched to abandon them began. “Here in America,” the editor of La America asserted as part of the Sephardi campaign, “no one asks who you were [before you arrived] and where you came from. A Sephardi immigrating here forgets all of his past in the old world and becomes an American Sephardi” (“Sefaradim orientales i portugezes”). But many of these potential “American Sephardim” expressed serious reservations about relinquishing identification with the “old world.” While the thrust of editorials in La America presented aspirations for a unified Sephardi community, in practice, the various groups often preferred independence and attended to their own members’ needs or raised funds to send back to their native towns on their own (e.g., “Por remitir moneda a Izmir”; “Ayudo a los sufrientes de la gera en Angora”). In one instance, thirty representatives of organizations from the Dardanelles, Izmir, and Gallipoli initially put up resistance until a flyer campaign convinced them to “embrace the crowning [enkrónamiento] of the name Sephardi over the name Oriental” (Saltiel, “Una grande viktoria”). These individuals did not necessarily perceive of their separation as sinät achim (“hatred among brothers”), as some of their detractors claimed, but rather as reflecting a legitimate understanding of difference and independence.
among the groups (Sevi). As late as 1930, linguist Max A. Luria argued that twenty-two separate “dialects” of Ladino could be found in New York, each city of origin home to a distinct “dialect” (Luria).

Like those who sought to preserve local identity, political opponents to Zionism also resisted the Sephardi campaign, most significantly, the leaders of the prominent Salonian Brotherhood of America in New York. Zionist advocates in favor of the Sephardi campaign, such as La America’s editor, Gadol, believed that the creation of a unified American Sephardi community would serve as the prerequisite for acceptance by mainstream American Jewish institutions, such as the Kehillah. Other contributors to the Ladino press similarly advocated for the creation of a Sephardi community to replace the Oriental Jewish Federation: “Is it that there is some federation of occidental Jews in New York so that we should call ourselves by the opposite name? The Yiddishim formed their Yiddish community [i.e., the Kehillah], and we should form our Sephardi community” (Avi). With this goal in mind, Gadol urged the Brotherhood to support his position that “we should call ourselves American Sephardim and not Orientals” and implored the Brotherhood to take the lead so that “all the institutions that do not recognize us as Jews because we do not speak Yiddish will understand that we are Jews, children of Jews, too” (“El progreso de la Ermandad Salonikiota”). Leaders of the Brotherhood initially rejected Gadol’s proposition. Instead, they preferred a federative communal structure—much like the principle on which the Socialist Workers’ Federation in Salonica operated and in which they had been active members (Naar, “From the ‘Jerusalem of the Balkans’ to the ‘Goldene Medina’” esp. 449, 454, 466)—in order to provide space for the perpetuation of local customs and identities and presumably to eschew the goals of Jewish nationalism (“Anual miting de la Ermandad Salonikiota de Amerika”).

Despite these initial hesitations regarding the crowning of Sephardi over the term Oriental or Turkino or town-based designations and the political reservations about the Zionist motives underpinning the movement, the logic of the Sephardi campaign ultimately seemed to triumph, especially after the final dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in the wake of the First World War. With the end of the Ottoman Empire, terms like Turkino and “Ottoman” lost their resonance. Contributors to the Ladino press in America in search of new ways to conceptualize their sense of community—as the dissolved Ottoman Empire no longer could provide a unifying framework—recognized that the term Sephardi traversed the divides between the new states that emerged out of territories of the former Ottoman Empire. As a sign of this transformation, in
1921, the Salonican Brotherhood of America reincorporated as the Sephardic Brotherhood of America and opened its doors to Ladino-speakers from towns other than Salonica (Alberto Levy). With this renaming, Selaniklis, Izmirlis, Monastirlis, and Rhodeslis (and thus those Jews from cities located within the borders of Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, and Italy, respectively) were recast as “Sephardim” in America.

With new usages of the term “Sephardi,” a slippery taxonomy also emerged. “Spanish” no longer always equaled “Sephardi,” but rather became one of four types of Sephardim. The others included “Arab” (from Aleppo and Damascus, for example), “Greek” (“Romaniote” Jews from Jannina), and “Portuguese” (those affiliated with Congregation Shearith Israel who previously held the monopoly on the term “Sephardi” in the United States), all of whom, it was argued, while not necessarily sharing common ancestry, nonetheless shared religious customs or a style of rabbinic jurisprudence vaguely linked to Spain—or at least common status as “non-Ashkenazim” (e.g., “Kualo devemos azer”). It is noteworthy that Persian Jews were not initially included in this schema, perhaps because so few Farsi-speaking Jews resided in the United States at the time, or perhaps because they were perceived to be a distinct, non-Sephardi group. Regardless, the “Sephardi” press in the United States never published in any of the other prospective “Sephardi” languages—neither Greek nor Arabic—and began using English in addition to Ladino only in the late 1920s and early 1930s (Naar, “From the ‘Jerusalem of the Balkans’ to the ‘Goldene Medina’” 471). While Ladino newspapers dedicated occasional articles to the Arabic- or Greek-speaking Jews, the primacy of Ladino in the Sephardic American press, through World War II, indicates the extent to which the Ladino-speaking Jews retained the most prominent voice among the various newly concretized Sephardic populations in the United States. The formulation of such a “pan-Sephardi” taxonomy, however imprecise and convoluted, continues to resonate today.

THE RISE OF SEPARDIC NATIONALISM

Despite the successes of the Sephardi campaign, the processes of recasting ethnic vocabularies occasionally wandered well beyond the initial Zionist impetus as evidenced by the development of a conception of “Sephardi nationalism.” Should Spain, rather than Palestine, constitute the authentic Sephardic
homeland? Should “Jews” and “Sephardim” be conceptualized as two distinct groups or, drawing on racialized language, should Ashkenazim and Sephardim be construed as two different peoples? Should a Hispanic or Spanish framework, rather than a Jewish one, provide the primary lens through which to view the Sephardi experience?

Early on in the Sephardi campaign in 1915, even Gadol became wary of the ultimate implications for his readers if they were to internalize the argument that Spain constituted the true homeland of the Sephardic Jews. Where would that leave the Land of Israel? Such apprehension led Gadol to conclude that while Spain may be understood as a place of origin for Sephardic Jews, it must not be conceptualized as a place to which Jews should be tempted to “return”:

We cannot undertake such a campaign [for the “return” of the “Spanish Jews” to their “native country”] knowing the sad history of the Inquisition and that we would not be so ignorant as to return to a country that left us with such sad memories . . . we labor for the honor and dignity of our nation under the new Jewish national ideal (Zionism) to make our people return to our ancient fatherland, “Palestine,” and never to another country in any part of the world, being that our conviction is that only in this way will the Jewish question be resolved. (“Espanya i los Sefaradim”)

While Gadol objected to the concept of Spain as a living homeland for Sephardic Jews, other commentators took exception to the whole “Sephardic campaign,” which one writer construed to be an “attempt to convert our Jews, who call themselves Jews, to Sephardim.” Within this context, the recasting of “ethnic” vocabulary permitted some Ladino-speaking Jews to refer to themselves as “Sephardim” in contradistinction not only to Ashkenazim, but also to “Jews,” to whom some Ladino-speakers began to refer in the third person (Glazier esp. 309; Stern 136). A Jew from Monastir who settled in Indianapolis recalled this phenomenon: “We used to speak about the Jewish guys, and the Sephardics were different. We didn’t speak of ourselves as Jewish guys. Really strange” (Glazier 309).

Taking this line of argument to its logical conclusion, in the 1930s some Ladino-speaking intellectuals began to promote a movement of nasionalizmo Sefaradi (“Sephardic nationalism”) that emphasized the Spanish character of Sephardic Jews and sometimes drew on the rising discussions of racial difference that permeated public discourse during the interwar years. The Istanbul-born physician Vitali Negri (1887–1972), for example, argued in the New
York Ladino newspaper, *La Vara*, that the Sephardim, who “are classified as a group under this name in order to maintain our prestige,” should establish their own “national council” to represent their interests before the Ashkenazim and American society, in general, through the organization of mass meetings, parades, and demonstrations to showcase the interests of Sephardic Jewry (“El nasionalizmo Sefaradi”). The aim was less to preserve a distinctive Sephardic culture—intermarriage between Sephardim and Ashkenazim was virtually non-existent until after World War II—but rather to gain recognition on the part of mainstream American Jewry and American society, more generally. Salonican-born scholar Henry Besso (1905–93), who received his masters degree from Columbia University, went further in arguing that Sephardim and Ashkenazim constituted two distinct “national” groups, in parallel to Spaniards and Poles, who happened to share a common religion. “The truth,” Besso proclaimed, “is that the Sephardi appears to be nothing like the Ashkenazi, whether a German or Pole. The Sephardi, to the contrary, has inherited, above all, the Iberian type and physiognomy” (“Sefaradi y Ashkenazi”). Part of the same circle of Sephardic intellectuals with Besso, Dardanelles-born Mair Jose Benardete (1889–1985), who became a Spanish professor at Brooklyn College, inaugurated the first university-level program in Sephardic Studies in the 1930s under the auspices of the Hispanic Institute at Columbia University rather than as part of Jewish Studies. Within this context, the affinity to the Hispanic world proved more alluring and conducive to an exploration of Sephardic history, culture and language, and also prompted Benardete to advocate in favor of the “Castilianization” of Ladino. The title of Benardete’s thesis demonstrates the new emphasis on and argument in support of the Spanish link: *Hispanic Culture and Character of the Sephardic Jews* (Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America* 161–73).

An emphasis on “Spanish” or “Hispanic” aspects of Sephardic Jewry also permeated popular discussions during the 1930s and into the period of the Second World War. Writing in 1935 in English in *El Ermanado*, the annual review of the Sephardic Brotherhood, about the responsibilities of the next generation of Sephardim now coming of age, Sylvia Florentin presented the main challenge as one that required the negotiation of “our Spanish heritage” and “the heritage of America.” She mentioned neither “Oriental” nor “Jewish” heritages, the first omission signifying the result of the Sephardi campaign, and the second, of Sephardi nationalist sentiment that envisioned “Sephardi” identity as synonymous with “Spanish” and as separate and even unrelated to “Jewish” (Florentin). The most extreme version of this kind of rhetoric emerged within the context of the Second World War, in which a Salonican-born journalist
who contributed often to the American Ladino press, Sam Levy, then living in France, wrote to the German Embassy in Paris and argued that the Sephardim of Salonica, because of their Spanish descent, should be exempted from treatment intended for Jews because Sephardim should be understood properly as a separate race: “Ario-Latins of the Mosaic faith.” The German Embassy investigated the issue, but ultimately concluded that Sephardim did not constitute a distinct race (Dublon-Knebel 84–95).

The effort to make such a claim demonstrates yet again the strategic utility of arguments about Sephardic difference both in the United States and beyond. The possibility of conceptualizing Sephardim and Ashkenazim not as two kinds of Jews, but as two separate peoples, and the possibility of conceptualizing Sephardim as inheritors not of a Jewish legacy, but rather of a Spanish one, represented the extent to which the arguments implicit in Sephardi campaign could wander astray from its intended, unifying Jewish framework.

**BECOMING SEPHARDI JEWS IN AMERICA AND BEYOND**

The rise of antisemitism and the Second World War facilitated the ultimate rapprochement between “Sephardim” and “Ashkenazim” in America. The Sephardic Brotherhood established the Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America in 1941. The inclusion of the term “Jewish” symbolized how its architects sought to be perceived: not as Sephardim, separate from Jews, but rather as Sephardim, a kind of Jew.  

This transformation signified an additional success and permutation of the Sephardi campaign launched first during the First World War, and also serves as a reminder that the meanings and interrelationships between categories such as “Jewish” and “Sephardic” were not preordained but shaped and redefined in different times and places by a variety of historical actors. The promoters of the Sephardi campaign, all recent immigrants to the United States who sought to positively shape their fate in their new political and cultural environments, privileged, naturalized and democratized the term “Sephardi” as a self-designation and remade Ottoman, Oriental, Salonican, or Rhodesli Jews (and perhaps to a lesser extent, at least initially, Greek- and Arabic-speaking Jews) in America into Sephardi Jews.

The possibilities of creating this “pan-Sephardic” group conceptualization in America emerged as a result of the Sephardi campaign begun in 1915 in New York, and the echoes of that effort remain alive today as represented by
organizations such as New York’s American Sephardi Federation, whose programs cover the breadth of the so-called non-Ashkenazi Jewish world (Aviv and Shneer 148–49). Simultaneously, the current effort by the Spanish government to invite certain Sephardic Jews to claim Spanish citizenship has provoked the disentangling of the inclusive, pan-Sephardi category in an attempt to separate those Jews who can claim descent from Spain.

The rhetoric surrounding the Spanish citizenship discussions remarkably echoes that of the Sephardi campaign from a century ago, especially the elements inspired by the Philo-Sephardic movement of senator Angel Pulido. At that time, Ladino-speaking Jews harnessed Pulido’s claims to counter deprecating Orientalist charges that they were backwards and uncivilized and sought to demonstrate, to the contrary, that they should be understood as the European, cultured, and industrious descendants of the great sages of medieval Spain, fit for participation in mainstream Jewish life. Ironically, however, the recasting of Ladino-speaking Ottoman-born Jews as “Sephardim since birth” substituted one mythology for another. The facile perceptions that Sephardic Jews preserved medieval Spanish intact and retained unhindered cultural loyalty to Spain despite more than four centuries of residence in the Ottoman Empire constitute the flipside of Orientalist imagery. Both present a swathe of the Jewish population as static and unchanging, whether as linked to the backwards Levant, or as relics of medieval Spain. Both images—myth and counter-myth—omit the intense dynamism, cultural innovation, and political change that characterized generations of Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire. The processes by which Jews in the Ottoman Empire began to think of themselves as Ottoman citizens in the nineteenth century, and those by which Jews from the Ottoman Empire began to recast themselves as “Sephardim since birth,” constitute two major transformations in self-conception that exemplify dynamism rather than stasis.

Ultimately, terms such as “Ottoman” “or “Sephardi” represent just two of a variety of layers of identity, affiliation, and loyalty to which individuals and collectivities appealed as part of a strategy of empowerment through which to shape their sense of self and community (Mays, “Transplanting Cosmopolitans). These terms also remind us of the constructed nature of individual and collective identities. While the invocation of certain terms and essentialized characteristics introduce a sense of order, such a process also blinds us to the realities and complexities of a changing Jewish world in which permeability and mobility characterized the relationships between various Jewish cultural and geographic centers in Europe and beyond. How, for example, are
we to classify the founder of *La Epoca*, the major Ladino newspaper published in Salonica? As the publisher’s name implies, Saadi Besalel Levy Ashkenazi (1820–1903) descended from an Ashkenazi family of printers that arrived in the Ottoman Empire from Amsterdam in the eighteenth century. Within a few generations the family became fully “Sephardic” in culture and language, even as relatives found their way from Salonica to France, Italy, Brazil and the United States during the twentieth century. Saadi’s son, Sam Levy, also a journalist, became one of the greatest defenders of the Ladino language. Yet, in his memoir, written in none other than Ladino, Saadi reflected that his family preserved the Ashkenazi custom of not naming children after the living (Rodrigue and Stein).

Launched a century ago, the “Sephardi campaign” intensified the processes of classification through which the term “Sephardi” emerged as a primary self-designation for Ladino-speaking Jews in the United States who sought to link themselves to the “golden age” of medieval Spanish Jewry, to claim “European” rather than “Oriental” heritage, and to achieve rapprochement with mainstream American Jewry. In other locales, these kinds of terminological shifts transpired at different times, as in the case of France, which became home to a large contingent of Ottoman-born Jews. There, the *Association Cultuelle Orientale de Paris*, established in 1909, did not change its name to the *Association Cultuelle Sephardite de Paris* until 1930. The higher social standing of these former Ottoman Jews, due in part to their predisposition to French culture, situated them as interlocutors between the established Jewish community in France and the recently arriving Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe (Hyman 78; Malinovich 127–29). The transformations and permutations of nomenclature varied from place to place (Lehmann; Mays; Guttstadt; Baer; Brodsky; Bejarano; Mays, “‘I killed her because I loved her too much’”; Ben-Ur, “Identity Imperative”; Stein, “Citizens of a Fictional Nation”).

As we have seen in the American context, not all agreed initially to recognize themselves as “Sephardim since birth” either because they preferred to highlight their Oriental or Ottoman affiliations, privileged their sense of connection to their town or city of origin, or opposed the ideological underpinnings of the movement. Some even extended the emphasis on their “Spanish” character to argue that Sephardim and Ashkenazim constituted two distinct peoples. Others argued for the creation of a “pan-Sephardi” community in the United States and beyond that would include not only Ladino-speaking, but also Arabic-, Greek-, and later Farsi-speaking Jews. The unresolved debates and discussions that developed a century ago in the United States over who
counts as a “Sephardic Jew”—and what that designation ought to mean—echo
today as Spain seeks to “restore” nationality to “Sephardic Jews” living across
the globe who have another opportunity to shape their sense of self and their
public image.
Notes


3. I follow Matthias B. Lehmann’s suggestion to consider “changing and contingent formations of Sephardi ‘groupness’ in changing contexts,” proposed in his “Rethinking Sephardi Identity: Jews and Other Jews in Ottoman Palestine.”

4. On Arabic-speaking Jews in the United States, see Sutton; on Greek-speaking Jews (Romaniates), see Dalven; Ikonomopoulos; Fleming 1–12.

5. The considerable numbers of Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe joined an already established population of German-speaking Jews, as well as a small contingent of Sephardi Jews of Portuguese origin established in America since colonial times and affiliated with synagogues such as Congregation Shearith Israel in New York. For an overview, see Diner.


7. Internal publications of Shearith Israel preferred the term “Oriental” through World War I, yet in the 1920s, Shearith Israel recognized the Oriental Jews as one of the two kinds of Sephardi Jews: “the Old Sephardim from Shearith Israel and the more recently arrived Sephardim from the Orient” (Menken; “The New Sephardic Jewish Community Center”).

8. On Sephardic mystique, see Schorsch 71–92; Efron; Stein, “Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewries since 1492.”


10. Pulido’s chief works on this topic included Israelitas españoles y el idioma castellano; Españoles sin Patria y la Raza Sefardi. See inter alia Goode.


“La historia del pueblo judío.” La America 19 Feb. 1915: 5.


“Por remitir moneda a Izmir.” *La America* 24 Dec. 1915: 3.


Devin E. Naar


Diasporic Reunions: Sephardi/Ashkenazi Tensions in Historical Perspective

by Aviva Ben-Ur

 Tradition prescribes that Jews rescue other Jews from affliction, underscored by the halakhic concept *pidyon shvu’im* (redemption of captives) and the Talmudic dictum *kol Israel arevim ze-ba-ze*, which teaches that every Jew is responsible for the other. Yet, when the factor of physical remoteness between two communities was eliminated, these time-honored values frequently dissipated. As one eminent historian quipped, “*ahavat Israel* is inversely proportionate to distance.”

Ethnic tensions among Jews are a transnational, diachronic phenomenon, amply documented by Jews as well as by outside observers. Scholars of the American Jewish experience have discussed such conflicts at length and have usually understood them as one defining feature of a particular historiographical period. During the so-called Sephardi era of American Jewish immigration (1654–1840), we are told, Sephardim lorded it over their Germanic coreligionists, sometimes refusing to marry them, while beginning in the 1880s Germanic Jews gave their Eastern European brethren the cold shoulder, labeling them “wild Russians” and “uncouth Asiatics,” until all groups seamlessly mingled following restrictive quotas of the 1920s that largely barred further Jewish immigration. But historians have not yet examined in a comparative context ethnic tensions among the world’s Jewish communities, nor are they accustomed to applying sociological, psychological, or anthropological tools to deepen understanding of these conflicts. This article, inspired by social scientific approaches, reveals two distinct clashes among Jewish ethnic groups.
that appear consistent across space and time: what I call “ranked stratification,” where issues of superiority and inferiority inform the discourse, and “co-ethnic recognition failure,” where ethnic belonging is denied.

Both historians and sociologists recognize that ethnic belonging is constantly negotiated and that a group’s self- and ascribed definitions are contextual and transform through time. Particularly in the case of Jews, whose variegated ethnic and religious identities overlap and are exceedingly complex, an explanation of terminology is imperative. Our frame of reference begins in the late seventeenth century with two groups conventionally known as “Sephardim” and “Ashkenazim.” In recent centuries, Ashkenazim have been understood to comprise two subgroups, both of whom ultimately trace their roots back to “Ashkenaz,” the medieval Hebrew word for “Germany”: Jews of Central European or Germanic origin, who spoke German or a western form of Yiddish, and Eastern European Jews, who typically spoke Yiddish or Slavic languages. Sephardim—from the medieval Hebrew word for “Spain”—are also divided into two subcategories, both of them of remote Iberian origin: “Western Sephardim,” who after their exile from the Peninsula settled in various lands in the West, including the Americas, and spoke Portuguese and Spanish; and “Eastern Sephardim,” Jews who settled in the Ottoman Empire (Turkey and the Balkans) and mainly spoke Ladino, a Jewish language that fused early modern Castillian with Turkish, Greek, Arabic, Aramaic, and French, and developed in the East after the exile from Iberia. A third group, much larger than both of these two Iberian-origin subgroups combined, is made up of Jews indigenous to Arab and Muslim lands. These Jews had no Iberian origins and largely spoke Arabic and Persian languages. Since World War I, these ancient communities, indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, have increasingly been subsumed under the category of “Sephardim,” itself a process of diasporic Jewish reunion, as we shall see. However, for the sake of geographical and linguistic accuracy, this third group will be referred to in a separate category—for lack of a better term, as Mizrahim (the Hebrew term for “Easterners”).

BROTHERS AND STRANGERS
Ranked stratification among ethnic groups is perhaps inevitable. Psychologists have found that “individuals who identify strongly with a group will be particularly motivated to establish its positive distinctiveness vis-à-vis other groups”
Diasporic Reunions

(Federico and Levin 52). Phrased another way, intense ethnic identity often goes hand in hand with self-exaltation contingent on the disparagement of the other. The gulf separating Iberian-origin from Ashkenazi Jews was in part informed by a variety of ethnic superiority myths that traced the ancestry of the former group to King David and the Judean Kingdom, and more recently to the glories of “Golden Age Spain,” a period from roughly the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, when Jews in the Muslim Iberian Peninsula supposedly attained a high degree of social integration without losing their religious allegiance. By contrast, Ashkenazim seem to have not cultivated parallel ethnic superiority myths, although some individuals did tout lineage to great Jewish scholars or ancient mystical traditions. Historian David Nirenberg suggests that the Sephardi obsession with noble roots arose after the persecutions of 1391, when thousands of Iberian Jews were forcibly converted to Christianity, thereby blurring the distinctions between the Peninsula’s ethno-religious communities. Claims to aristocratic lineage—reinforced by armorial bearings and often-fabricated family trees—helped individuals and families distinguish themselves from Christian neophytes. The absence of parallel nobility myths among Ashkenazim may help to explain why Sephardi hegemony continued in the Americas even after Ashkenazim became the numerically dominant Jewish population.

Demands of the “host society” that Jews adopt Westernization is a second factor that exacerbated intra-group tensions during the process of diasporic reunion. The east-west divide among Ashkenazim did not arise until the first half of the nineteenth century when emerging nation states in Western and Central Europe, implementing programs of Emancipation, demanded that Jews wholly identify as French-, German-, or Englishmen by discarding their linguistic and sartorial distinctions and shrinking their Jewishness into the category of religion, devoid of any sense of peoplehood or yearning for the Land of Israel. By the mid-nineteenth century, once the majority of urban, Central European Jews had left the “ghetto” and acquired middle class status, they re-identified as “German Jews” and labeled their unemancipated brethren as “Ostjuden” (Eastern Jews) or those of “Halb-Asien” (Half Asia) (Aschheim 3, 31). With the mass westward immigration of Eastern European Jews in the 1880s, these latter began to fully embody their two functions, as both threat and foil to German Jews (Aschheim 12).

American Jews of Iberian origin, whose ancestors in Spain and Portugal had been forcibly converted to Christianity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and were thus fully conversant with Western society by the time
they abandoned the Peninsula and reverted to Judaism, underwent similar embarrassment and redefinition during the mass influx of Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim from the disintegrating Ottoman Empire beginning in the early 1900s. This encounter, most notably developed in the United States of America, brought into currency the dichotomous terms “Old” or “Western Sephardim,” versus “New” or “Oriental Jews,” and eventually “Eastern Jews” or “Eastern Sephardim.” Both diasporic reunions—those among “Ashkenazi” Jews and those among Jews newly conglomerated together as “Sephardim”—were informed by the “modernization of Jewish life and consciousness” (Aschheim 3) perhaps better described as modern Westernization.

The approach of German Ashkenazi and Western Sephardi Jews toward their “Eastern” coreligionists was undeniably philanthropic. But this benevolence was deeply informed by a double-pronged goal: to “deflect from themselves political and popular opinion critical of immigration and the immigrant and to set a standard of conduct for the immigrants that would effectively neutralize nativist sentiment” (Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto* 9). Historian Steven Aschheim’s description of encounters between the two Ashkenazi groups in Central Europe also holds true for Western and Eastern Sephardim in America: they were at once “brothers and strangers.”

We can locate some parallels to the Sephardi/Ashkenazi fissure in the Dutch American colonies. In Suriname, where Portuguese-speaking Jews founded an autonomous Jewish community in the 1660s, friction arose after Ashkenazim began to immigrate in the late seventeenth century. Initially, they prayed alongside their Portuguese coreligionists and adopted their rituals and Hebrew pronunciation. Joint worship under Portuguese Jewish cultural and political hegemony had also been the norm in Recife, Brazil, where an open, largely Iberian-origin community openly professed Judaism from the 1630s until the fall of the Dutch colony to the Portuguese in 1654 (Sarna 12). Recife’s community was too short-lived to experience the full ramifications of diasporic reunion. But in Suriname, once Ashkenazim had reached a critical mass in the 1710s, cracks in the blended community began to appear. Portuguese Jewish leaders designated a separate house of prayer for Ashkenazim, even as the latter remained under the legal jurisdiction of the Portuguese Jewish court. Continuing religious disagreements led Portuguese Jewish leaders in 1724 to petition the colonial governor for an official separation, which was formalized in 1734, resulting in the formation of an independent Ashkenazi court of Jewish law (Vink 196–97). Anti-Ashkenazi animosity persisted for generations. Portuguese Jews perceived German Jews as more assimilable to
Portuguese Jewish culture than Jews of Polish origin, but both Central and Eastern European Jews were vulnerable to disparaging remarks. In the 1780s, Surinamese Portuguese Jewish leader David Cohen Nassy sneered at his coreligionists’ “ridiculous manners,” “superstitions,” and “bigotry,” which he thought were exacerbated by the influx of Polish Jews (Nassy part 1:83, 85). That these internecine prejudices could prevail in a colony, ninety percent of whose population was enslaved and of African origin, speaks to both the insularity of the Jewish community from white Christian society and the power of intra-Jewish conflicts to override the ascriptive identity that would ultimately recast Portuguese Jews and Ashkenazim as simply “Jews.”

Over a century later, similar dilemmas developed in Britain’s overseas colonies, where Jews of primarily Iraqi origin and Ashkenazim from various European lands relocated in the late nineteenth century. Arnold Wright, at the turn of the next century, noted that in Singapore there “was always a certain element of antipathy between the Ashkenasi and the Sephardi Jews which found expression more often in the first generation than in the second. . . . The Baghdad Jews have two synagogues which they frequent, the German [or Ashkenasi] Jew keeping himself strictly apart and being as often as not rationalist” (Nathan 58). Memoirist Eze Nathan, who grew up in the Singaporean Arabic-speaking community during the first half of the twentieth century, found Wright’s account “only slightly exaggerated” (58). These tensions found similar parallels during the same era in cosmopolitan Shanghai, where long-standing Baghdadi-origin Jews clashed with Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe and Nazi Germany (Ristaino 23–25).

Rifts also developed in Australia, whose native-born Jewish community was less than half of one percent of the total population in the early 1900s. These Jews, primarily of Ashkenazi origins, had limited observance or knowledge of Jewish traditions, identified as Australians (or British subjects) of the Jewish faith, and saw themselves as part of Australian society in every realm except religion (Samra 106–07). They actively opposed the immigration of 2,000 Eastern European refugees in the 1920s, balking at their Yiddish and strong Jewish observance. Like the nineteenth-century “German” Jews of America, Australian Jews feared their own status in broader society would fall. Their rabbis and secular Jewish leaders supported restrictive immigration, petitioning the government in the 1920s to stem the influx because, they claimed, it would pull the existing Jewish community into destitution. With the rise of Nazi power the following decade, the Australian Jewish community’s German Jewish Relief Fund raised £50,000, even as they attempted to bar Jewish refugees from
entering the country. The Australian Jewish Welfare Society, fearing an intensification of anti-Semitism locally, advocated that no more than six Jewish exiles enter on any ship, each group to be accompanied by an English teacher (Samra 107–08). Nonetheless, it should be noted that Australia’s acceptance of 15,000 German refugees over three years was relatively speaking the most generous policy of any nation (Samra 109).

During the mid-twentieth century, a new subethnic group further diversified Australia’s Jewish community. Its members, the majority of whom had been dislodged from their homes in India, Burma, Singapore, and Shanghai during World War II, and shared distant Iraqi origins, founded The New South Wales Hebrew Association in 1953 (Aaron 55). The selection of an ethnically vague name suggests not only uncertainty about collective self-definition, but also a reluctance to choose an identity associated with things “Oriental” (Samra 267). Three years later, amidst internal dissension, the group re-launched itself as the “New South Wales Association of Sephardim.” A local Ashkenazi rabbi and advocate had urged them to do so since [sic]: “The fact is all of you are Sephardim and the Sephardim have a proud heritage” (Samra 268). Anthropologist Myer Samra argues that the “imputation of Spanish genetic origins” served multiple purposes: the established Australian Jews were familiar with what a Sephardi (but not an Iraqi or Mizrahi) Jew was; it countered the inferiority of Oriental self- and ascribed-identity; and it facilitated Jewish immigration during the White Australia Policy, which barred non-whites, including initially most Mizrahim, from settling in the country (Samra 314). By the mid-1980s, Myer observes, the “need to stress Spanishness” had declined in the Australian Jewish community, in part as a result of their acculturation to normative Jewish identity, in part due to the rescinding of the White Australia Policy in 1973 (Samra 317; Palfreeman 349).

Australia is a particularly interesting case since the recency of internal Jewish friction allows us to examine the process of identity amalgamation and separation as it was taking place (Samra 36). The striking parallels to the contemporaneous US and Israeli Jewish communities confirm a worldwide trend beginning in World War I whereby Jews (of Iberian origin and Mizrahim Jews native to Arab and Muslim lands) banded together with other non-Ashkenazi Jews under the “Sephardi” banner in order to achieve political power, visibility, and acceptance in the larger, normative Jewish community. In the United States, a parallel decision was ultimately made to politically unite—under the “Sephardi” banner—all non-Ashkenazi Jews, who in the process were
implicitly proffered Iberian ancestry, even when it had never existed, as in the case of Iranian, Ethiopian, or Bukharian Jews (Behar).6

As we have seen, similar dynamics of confrontation and re-definition were repeated whenever and wherever two disparate and sufficiently sizeable Jewish diasporic groups were brought together in the same locale after generations of no direct contact. Their initial differences included geographical origin and language, and consequent variations in cultural and religious background, profession, and formal education. Often, as in the case of native-born Jews and immigrants, class exacerbated these tensions. Each of these diasporic reunions was characterized by a reluctance or refusal to participate together in religious rites or communal matters, to intra-marry, to identify as members of the same group, and in some cases to support immigration, all of which coexisted with the impulse of philanthropy. Sometimes these group relations displayed an arc beginning with coexistence, culminating in formal separation, and ending with mingling as either the group boundaries blurred through acculturation and intramarriage (matrimonial unions among Jews of difference ethnicities) or, as in the case of Suriname, when the colonial authorities brought a formal end to separatist practices (Vink 202–04). In other cases, such as “Ashkenazi” versus “Sephardi/Mizrahi” relations in Australia and the United States, the impediments against a unified Jewish community have not yet been fully dissolved.

**CO-ETHNIC RECOGNITION FAILURE: THE DENIAL OF SHARED IDENTITY**

One overlooked aspect of intra-ethnic Jewish tensions in modern times, much more puzzling than any antipathy heretofore discussed, is co-ethnic recognition failure, one person’s denial of a group member’s common ethnicity. In contrast to the disparaging “we are Israelites, they are Jews” mantra of the German-Eastern European encounter (Wise),7 or “we are Sephardim, they are Oriental Jews” (Papo 52, 54) impulse in Western-Eastern Sephardi relations, the cause of this failure to include is genuine ignorance of Jewish cultural variation. Co-ethnic recognition failure is a category of “experience-distance,” intended for use by social analysts, in distinction to “native, folk or lay categories,” which are “categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors” (Cooper and Brubaker 62). Phrased in a simpler way, “co-ethnic recognition failure” is a somewhat awkward term
that obscures to non-specialists its immediately identifiable meaning. Yet the concept of “failing to recognize” approximates the experience as retold by its targets, who recalled not “being taken for Jews,” and not being “believed to be Jews” (Gadol, “El rolo del jurnal ‘La Amerika’”).

Sefardi and Mizrahi Jews, who are the principle targets of this phenomenon, have recorded their experiences in oral interviews, newspaper articles, and memoirs over the course of the twentieth century, and continue to do so. More recent targets are “Jews of Color,” who trace their non-Ashkenazi ancestry to conversion, inter- and intra-marriage, or adoption (Sanchez 9; Tobin; Kaye/Kantrowitz). Their testimonies suggest that many Ashkenazi Jews are “generally unaware of Jewish multiculturalism” (Sanchez 17). As anthropologist Jack Glazier notes, co-ethnic recognition failure also underscores the parochial self-awareness of Jews who assumed that only “Yiddish and its associated cultural symbols defined Jewish identity” (Glazier, “Indianapolis Sephardim” 31).

One early example dates to the tenure of Mayor William Jay Gaynor (1909–13), when a number of Ashkenazi Jews of the Lower East Side, protesting street disturbances and neighborhood disputes, petitioned him to remove the “Turks in our midst.” The main problem with the complaint was that these “Turks” were actually fellow Jews. Upon learning of their mistake, the Ashkenazim—primarily Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern European origin—withdraw the petition, deciding to settle the matter “among themselves” (Thomas 200). Eastern Sephardi Jews, with their unfamiliar physiognomy, Mediterranean tongues, and distinct religious and social customs baffled their Ashkenazi brethren. One young Russian-born woman of New York City was both captivated and confused by Jack, a young man of uncertain ethno-religious identity she had met at a ball in 1916 organized by a Ladino newspaper. “At first glance,” Clara wrote, “I thought him Italian. The way he spoke, his countenance and his gestures were like those of the Italians. But later, when we began seeing each other, he swore to me that he is a Spanish-speaking Jew.” Clara’s parents objected to the union because they did not believe that Jack was indeed Jewish, forcing Clara to appeal to the newspaper editor to verify in print “if it is possible, that a Jew who doesn’t speak Jewish, and doesn’t look Jewish, can nevertheless have a Jewish soul” (“Tribuna Libera”).

This problem of co-ethnic recognition failure propelled Bulgarian-born Moise Gadol to launch the country’s first Ladino newspaper in 1910. The Eastern Sephardi newcomers Gadol first met when he arrived in New York described shared identity denial as their worst immigrant hardship (Gadol,
“El rolo del jurnal ‘La Amerika’”). With tears in their eyes, they related that when they presented themselves for employment, they were “not believed by the Ashkenazim to be Jews, except with very great efforts and with all sorts of explanations . . .” (Gadol, “Por La Lingua”). Many Eastern Sephardi job seekers learned to arrive at Ashkenazi-owned establishments bearing copies of Gadol’s weekly La America in their hands, and were able to convince incredulous employers of their Jewish identity “by showing our newspaper with [its] Hebrew letters,” peppered with announcements from the Ashkenazi press (Gadol, “Por La Lingua”).

The multiple reports of this experience from a variety of sources—contemporaneous and reminiscent, Jewish and non-Jewish—make it clear that co-ethnic recognition failure was neither folkloric nor a case of social snobbery. Forged of genuine ignorance, it occurred in every place where Eastern Sephardim settled, including, aside from New York, in Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, and Seattle (Angel, “Sephardic Culture in America” 277 and La America 52; Dash 12; Ferris 166; Luria; Glaser 328; Glazier, “American Sephardim” 310; “Stigma” 51–52; and “Indianapolis Sephardim” 31–32; Ligier, “Chicago and Los Angeles Sephardic Communities” 80; Papo, Sephardim in Twentieth Century America 47; Stern, Sephardic Jewish Community 98–100 and “Ethnic Identity”; Sutton 23; Zenner 233–34). Even without full and detailed cognizance of the multiple cases experienced across the country, Gadol was a good enough journalist to recognize that his weekly “would not suffice to recount one part of this sad situation” (Gadol, “Por La Lingua”).

Jews of Arab lands, whose mass immigration began after the rise of the State of Israel, also confronted this irksome phenomenon. Both Nitza Druyan and Dina Dahbany-Miraglia document that Ashkenazim often failed to recognize Yemenite Jews as coreligionists and coethnics (Druyan; Dahbany-Miraglia, “American Yemenite Jews”). This denial of shared ethno-religious identity, however, carried with it a sharper racial sting. With their “dark skin” and “curly hair” (the terms are Dahbany’s), Yemenite Jews were frequently mistaken for gentle African Americans and resorted to strategies long familiar to the country’s black community. When seeking apartments in Jewish neighborhoods, Yemenite Jews would dispatch a lighter-skinned family member or friend in their stead. When soliciting employment, particularly before the 1960s, they sought “the mediation of a friend or a relative” (Dahbany-Miraglia, “American Yemenite Jews” 67). Yemenite Jews, with no Judeo-Arabic newspaper they might present to incredulous Ashkenazim as proof of their Jewishness, were forced to employ tactics traditionally used by many African Americans and
Hispanics in a racially discriminatory America. The denial by Ashkenazim of shared ethnicity with Eastern Sephardim (and more recently, with “Jews of Color”) reflects the racialist idea, which intensified in the nineteenth century, that one defining marker of Jewishness is phenotype.13

Sephardim and Mizrahim experienced the repercussions of co-ethnic recognition failure on many levels. On the one hand, the denial of shared ethnicity and religion was personally painful and frustrating to immigrants who had been born and raised as Jews, understood their Jewishness as a heritable—and thus an inalienable—identity, and were now being mistaken for non-Jews. Psychological studies suggest that “individuals require connectedness and belonging with others in order to function optimally,” and that “rejection and exclusion from social relationships . . . can lead to anxiety, negative affect and depressed self-esteem” (Pickett and Brewer 90), something Gadol seems to have fully understood. Ashkenazi rejection of Sephardim as potential marriage partners may have played a role in the high rates of intermarriage among first and second-generation Eastern Sephardim. According to estimates, unions between Eastern Sephardim and non-Jews in Seattle during the 1930s and early 1970s were four and three times as common, respectively, as marriages between Sephardim and Ashkenazim (Adatto 63, 64; Sitton 338).

Another unintended consequence of co-ethnic identity failure was unintentionally passing for other ethnic groups. In 1914, David de Sola Pool, spiritual leader of New York’s Congregation Shearith Israel, remarked that many Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim had not been included in Jewish immigration statistics “because they have been passed as Turks or Greeks, not being easily recognizable as Jews, either in name, language or physical appearance” (de Sola Pool 4, 11, 20). HIAS officials stationed at Ellis Island were qualified to deal with Eastern European Ashkenazim, but were not familiar with the languages or names of Mizrahi and Eastern Sephardi Jews. Thus, many or most of these Jews passed by Ashkenazi immigration officials unnoticed and did not receive the assistance to which they were entitled (Gadol, “La Nación”; Gadol, “El emportante raporto”). Until Eastern Sephardim were appointed as volunteer interpreters at Ellis Island, many others slipped through HIAS’s philanthropic cracks and were often turned back to their native lands.

Nevertheless, some Jewish immigrants embraced passing as an opportunity. As early as 1893, Eastern Sephardi Jews were asked to pose as indigenous (and implicitly Muslim) Middle Easterners at the Chicago World’s Fair. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that roughly four-fifths of the “inhabitants of the Turkish village on the Midway Plaisance at the Chicago Exposition were Jews,”
from merchants, clerks and actors, to servants, musicians, and dancing girls. Only when the “Streets of Constantinople” came to a virtual standstill on Yom Kippur was the charade exposed as a public secret (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 68). New York Sephardi leader Joseph Gedalecia, who had himself immigrated to the United States via Paris as “a Frenchman,” noted in 1914 that many Jewish immigrants native to Greece and other Mediterranean countries intentionally passed as non-Jewish (“Discussion”). Reminiscing on Sephardi communal affairs from his Los Angeles home in 1976, Albert J. Amateau claimed he knew “fifty or more” Sephardim who “changed their names and pretended they were anything but Jews,” one passing for a Christian Italo-Frenchman (Letter to Papo). Many Eastern Sephardim allegedly succumbed to the temptation to “pass” for business reasons, Amateau alleged, including the multi-millionaire Schinasi brothers of New York tobacco factory fame. This, however, did not prevent them from later embracing the Sephardi community as prominent leaders and philanthropists (Letter to Papo). This apparent relief at being excluded from or by a group highlights a recent finding that “social exclusion can sometimes be a positive experience.” Eastern Sephardim who actively embraced or willingly accepted a variety of non-Jewish Mediterranean identities are paradigmatic of the “self-expansion model,” whereby individuals seeking more benefits than their natal group provide and pursuing more desirable opportunities elsewhere, happily sever their ties (McLaughlin-Volpe et al. 126–27).

Co-ethnic recognition failure seems to have led some Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim to internalize the Ashkenazi image of them as non-Jews or “Turks.” American-born Ben Cohen, whose family had immigrated from Monastir in 1910, confessed: “We used to speak about the Jewish guys, and the Sephardics were different. Really strange” (Glazier, “Indianapolis Sephardim”; “American Sephardim” 309). An elderly Eastern Sephardi of Indianapolis interviewed in the 1980s recalled being warmly greeted at a recent party by many “Sephardics” and “even Jewish people” (Glazier, “Stigma” 51). Eastern Sephardim in Los Angeles also tended to identify as “Sephardic” and to reject the term Jewish as a self-referential (Stern, “Ethnic Identity” 136). The Ladino term for Eastern European Ashkenazim, “Yiddishim” (composed of the word “Yiddish,” a reference to both the language and Jewishness, and appended to the Hebrew plural suffix) (Benardete 35–36) reinforced the idea that Ashkenazim were the only authentic Jews. Syrian Jews were also complicit in reinforcing a model of “authentic” Jewishness. These immigrants referred to Eastern European Ashkenazim as “Jewish” or “Iddish.” A male Ashkenazi Jew was an “Iddshy,” while a female an “Iddshiyeh.” Syrian Jews referred (and still
refer) to themselves as “S-Ys,” the first two letters of “Syrian,” and nicknamed Ashkenazi Jews (of any background) as “J.W.s” or “J-Dubs,” from the first and last letters of the word “Jew” (Sutton 151; Marshall 46; Victory Bulletin passim; and personal observation). New York’s Syrian Jews used these terms unabashedly, constructing a world trifurcated into “Syrians” (meaning Syrian Jews), “Jews” (Ashkenazim), and “Gentiles” (Cohen 3). These ethnic terms, like the use of Ladino and Arabic words and phrases in English speech, undoubtedly cultivated an “in-group’ spirit,” as Joseph Sutton suggests (Sutton 151), but reveal much more. If the established group was Jewish, what was the immigrant, minority group? The origin of these monikers within immigrant Jewish communities suggests that Eastern Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in a part of their psyches assigned “true” Jewish identity to Ashkenazim, with the implicit negation of their own authentic Jewish belonging. An extreme example is the case of Yemenite Jewish immigrants who arrived in the United States after World War II and sometimes called each other shvartze and shvartze khaye, the derogatory Yiddish expressions for “nigger” (literally, “black”) and “nigger beast” (literally, “black beast”), respectively, terms they heard from the mouths of their Ashkenazi contemporaries (Dahbany-Miraglia, An Analysis of Ethnic Identity 179; “Acculturation and Assimilation” 130; and “On the Outside Looking In” [3], [4] and [5]).14 Here again a Jewish subgroup internalized the majority group’s parochial—and in this case racist—perception.

As with ranked stratification, co-ethnic recognition failure in Jewish immigrant communities appears to be a transnational phenomenon. In 1920s Argentina, when an Ashkenazi woman wed a Syrian Jew, her family “suspected that she was involved in an exogamic relationship. The groom’s knowledge of Hebrew prayers helped convince them that they were not giving their blessing to a ‘mixed’ marriage” (Klich 19–20). Ashkenazi denial of the Jewishness of Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim was among the longest-lived of immigrant memories, perhaps because it threatened the most crucial aspects of a newcomer’s adjustment: collective identity, livelihood, and love.

Yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that this failure to recognize group belonging was not exclusively a function of a hegemonic Ashkenazi majority interacting with an Eastern Sephardi or Mizrahi minority. Aschheim found that during World War I, many Eastern European Jews were apparently unconvinced that German Jewish soldiers were fellow Jews (250). José Estrugo, an Ottoman-born Sephardi who settled in Los Angeles in 1920, noted that Ashkenazim who immigrated to the Anatolian Peninsula in early 1900s were not believed to be Jews, since they did not have “Spanish” names, nor
did they speak “Spanish.” The matriarch of one prominent Sephardi family of Istanbul, whose granddaughter had fallen in love with an Ashkenazi merchant, objected to the union because, to her understanding, someone who did not speak Spanish could not be a Jew (Estrugo 65). In the course of his fieldwork among Indianapolis Sephardim, Glazier once observed a non-Jewish Spanish-speaker chatting with older Ladino-speaking congregants in the local Sephardi synagogue. One worshiper asked the visitor how she managed to speak such good Spanish, despite not being Jewish (Glazier, “American Sephardim” 315). Acculturated European and American Ashkenazim who traveled to lands with majority Sephardi/Mizrahi populations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often taken for European-origin Christians, largely based on their dress. US-born Semitic scholar Cyrus Adler, who visited Damascus in 1891, noted that one “old [Jewish] man wasn’t satisfied that I was a Jew simply from being able to speak Hebrew, so he made me recite the Shema” (Robinson 46). Nahum Slouschz (1872–1969), an Odessa-born writer and Hebrew literature specialist who was traveling in Libya, found that both the governor of Tripoli and a Turkish administrative officer assumed he was a European Christian accompanied by a Jewish dragoman. Hayyim Habshush, Slouschz’s hired translator, probably presumed the same. “It was no avail for me to explain that I was not a Rumi (Christian),” Slouschz recalled, “nobody would believe me” (168). Slouschz was even more astonished by his reception from Jews on the island of Jerba: “I passed through the market unnoticed. I was evidently taken for some French Colonial, loafing through the town.” Only after he began to converse in Hebrew to an “old rabbi” did the local Jews realize his Jewish identity (253).

The impulse to equate one own’s Jewish culture with normativity and even exclusivity seems to be a factor of membership in an overwhelming majority, or of insulation from the wider world and its ethno-linguistic complexity (or both). But more broadly, these encounters speak to what Aschheim calls “the problem of Jewish identity in the modern world” (252) or perhaps better phrased, the consequences of westernization for modern Jewish diasporic relations. This crisis, as it effected Jews worldwide, brought into question the “nature and meaning of Jewish culture, commitment, and assimilation.” It also raised questions about the non-Jewish groups Jews were “mistaken” for. Where did one boundary begin and the other end?
HISTORY LESSONS: ASHKENAZI/SEPHARDI RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Ranked stratification and co-ethnic recognition failure may be the most salient features of Ashkenazi/Sephardi conflicts in modern times. Yet, as this brief comparative survey suggests, these tensions are structural in nature, rather than culturally specific to any Jewish ethnic group. Social class, longevity in the land, ethnic superiority myths, fear that newcomers would cause status demotion, and the Westernizing demands of broader society seem to be the main factors that interfered with intramarriage, joint worship and cooperation, and support for unimpeded immigration. Cultural insulation and hegemony, on the other hand, determined the denial of shared ethno-religious belonging. Yet, ranked stratification and co-ethnic recognition failure were two sides of the same diasporic coin, an international currency that memorialized what happened “when diasporas met” in a Westernizing age.

Some would argue that intra-Jewish friction has been transient and minor when compared to ethno-religious solidarity, and that the frequency or severity of “prejudice” or “discrimination” in the Jewish community is exaggerated. This skepticism compels us to think about the nature of historical sources, what causes such sources to come into being, and what ensures their preservation. It is not an accident that nearly every documented case of co-ethnic recognition failure is told from the perspective of the person denied shared ethnicity, or that most complaints about “Ashkenazi racism” come from Eastern Sephardim, Mizrahim, or “Jews of Color,” for it is they who bore the consequences. Such an experience was memorable and meaningful for them because it imperiled employment opportunities, romantic or marital liaisons, participation in the Jewish community, and the psychological wellbeing that social inclusion can bring. The denier of shared identity, on the other hand, would have found the experience of little importance, and thus had few incentives to recall or document it. Good historiographical practice demands that we consider the experiences and memories of non-normative groups, even if the narratives of the mainstream do not echo them.

Another important incentive for downplaying intra-Jewish hostilities may be that they are embarrassing to lay members of the communities and to scholars of the American Jewish experience whose academic and Jewish identities overlap. Intra-ethnic conflicts—whether past or current—contradict the dominant themes of American Jewish history, and subvert a “Jewish ascent narrative” that begins with flight from persecution, continues on to immigration and hardship, and resolves in a unified, albeit acculturated, American
Jewish community. This imagined progression has been popularized in the best known US Jewish novels, memoirs, and films (if not in much of American Jewish historiography), and represents the mainstream community’s preferred mode of self-representation to the outside world (Shapiro). But ignoring or deemphasizing internal conflict also means dismissing the power differentials between groups that erase or edit out marginal views from the historical transcript. It also means neglecting the multi-lingual immigrant documents (such as the Ladino press or interviews recorded in Spanish, Arabic, or Farsi) that centrally position immigrant hardships and exclusion from the broader Jewish community. Here again, the historical discipline demands that we consider neglected sources and how these may reshape our narrative of the American Jewish past.

The argument that intra-Jewish tensions were insignificant tacitly implies that a unified Jewish community has already been created via an American-style “mizug galuyyot,” a Jewish melting pot of diasporic groups into one cohesive people (Rejwan 22). Advocates of this ethical imperative seldom if ever acknowledge that the process of Jewish diasporic encounter and redefinition has always been closely informed by power differentials, with numerically dominant or hegemonic Jews shaping much of the discourse, arbitrating Jewish normativity, and dictating the cultural model. The risk for smaller or disempowered Jewish groups is always that Jewish unity will be achieved through the assimilation—in effect, disappearance—of their subcultures, rather than through the amalgamation or incorporation that “mizug galuyot” deceptively implies. No conversation about ahavat Israel within the framework of Jewish communal unity should ever take place without the awareness of the power dynamics we have examined in historical context. Similarly, no narrative of American Jewish history should ignore the process that dictates how we should remember the Jewish past, and what we should forget or ignore as “unimportant” or “unrepresentative.”

The increasing ancestral diversity of the American Jewish community in recent years ensures us that these uncomfortable issues are not confined to the past (Tobin, Tobin, and Rubin; Selengut). It would be foolhardy to argue that Jews were and are somehow unaffected by received attitudes, or by the fears and racial ideas of their broader non-Jewish environments. No degree of Jewish religious or ideological conviction can ever overpower these influences. If Jews today were to view their intra-group relations less in religious terms, and more in historical terms, a new conversation could begin.
Notes

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1. On some of these issues see Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shavuot 39a; Troen and Pinkus.

2. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932–2009) related this maxim in a graduate seminar on Jews in the Ottoman Empire, which I attended at Columbia University in the early 1990s. The Hebrew phrase may be roughly translated in this context as “love for one's fellow Jews.”

3. This view is best summarized by Marcus 1000-06.


5. For the emergence of this trend during World War I see “Sefardíes” 496.

6. See also American Sephardi Federation.

7. The exact phrase, which actually alludes more to national origin than an east-west ethnic divide, is: “We are Israelites of the nineteenth century and a free country, and they gnaw the dead bones of past centuries . . . we let them be Jews and we are the American Israelites.”

8. Thomas cites “Rene Darmstader, The Jewish Community” (manuscript), which I have not been able to locate.

9. Clara’s letter appears in Ladino translation only.

10. The short-lived newspaper Gadol says he launched before La America in reaction to co-ethnic recognition failure was probably La Aguila, the country’s first Ladino newspaper.

11. For another example of La America used as proof of Jewishness see Gadol, “La Nación.”

12. For Yemeni Jews as a physiologically varied group often mistaken for gentile Hispanic and black in the United States, see Arami 104.

13. The idea that Jews embody indelible, physical differences, however, is much older. See Gilman.

14. For parallel examples in the State of Israel see Dahbany-Miraglia, An Analysis of Ethnic Identity; “Acculturation and Assimilation”; “On the Outside Looking In”; Gross 1; and Hakak 117–18. For an example of the term applied to an Eastern Sephardic Jew see Varon 52.
Diasporic Reunions

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Aviva Ben-Ur


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The words are the same, but the melodies are foreign. They have a German-Yiddish slant. Many of them are slow, meandering, and sorrowful. I don’t feel quite at home. I am in a synagogue in Los Angeles for Ashkenazy Jews whose origins are the winter ghettos of Eastern Europe, and I am a Sephardic Jew whose ancestors come from the desert lands of Morocco.

I grew up in the mellah of Casablanca. Mellah is Arab slang for ghetto. It’s where the Jews huddled for centuries in Arabian lands, most of us refugees from the Spanish Inquisition of 1492. It is in these Jewish neighborhoods that we held on tight to our Jewish rituals but also embraced Arab customs, especially the music. How could we not? Arab music hypnotizes. It is the sound of the desert, the seduction of the sun.

Arab melodies were not written by people shivering in a Polish winter. They were written by romantics who saw the eternity of the sand . . . and dreamed.

These Arabian melodies, which also drew from Andalusian and Berber influences, infiltrated the Moroccan synagogue. I grew up with them. They’re bold and gentle at the same time. Sung by a master, they compete with God for your attention, and often win. With such beauty, who can absorb anything else? When a melody fills you completely, what else is there room for?

More than anything, it is these desert melodies that I took with me into exile when we packed our bags for the arctic winters of Canada in the 1960s.
Exile in the Jewish tradition is a complicated word. There is, first, the overarching experience of biblical exile to which we are obligated. This is the exile that Jews learn about in Hebrew school, at Shabbat tables, and at summer camps—our people were dispersed for nineteen centuries after the destruction of the Second Temple, and during that time, they wandered, struggled, built communities, adapted, suffered the darkest moment of their history, survived, and, through it all, prayed that one day they would return home to Zion.

Since the miraculous rebirth of Israel in 1948, Jews of the Diaspora are obligated, in theory at least, to feel a certain emptiness in their souls if they haven’t journeyed back to their biblical home. Beneath this biblical exile, however, there are sub-exiles that are no less important. These are exiles where, for instance, one might live in Canada and miss the beaches of Casablanca, or one might live in France and miss the desert sands of Algeria.

The Jewish story, a long, complex story of a wandering and nomadic people, is very much about negotiating exiles, of living with the tension of competing exiles—big ones, biblical ones, personal ones. The most eventful of these exiles is undoubtedly the exile in America—the one nation that has dared to compete with Zion for the ingathering of the exiles. In its innocent and disarming way, but with New York-style chutzpah, America has thrown a wrinkle in the Great Jewish Story by providing a harbor safe enough for Jews to live with a vengeance.

The scholar Micah Goodman has said that Jews nurtured two great dreams over the nearly two millennia of their exile. One was the biblical yearning to return to Zion, the other was the yearning to find a place—any place—that would accept them as Jews. As it turns out, both dreams were realized in the same century: America and Israel. What makes the exile in America so poignant is how brilliantly it has managed to compete with the exile of obligation—with the dream of returning home. Here is a clash of biblical proportions: Israel as the supreme statement of particularity, America as the supreme statement of universality. How Jews negotiate the clash between these two great ideals will determine much of the Jewish narrative over the next century.

Ask any fervent Zionist and he or she will tell you that American Jews, however free and liberated they might be, ought to feel a sense of betrayal to Zion. After all, the dream of finding a place that would accept us was always meant to be temporary; it was never meant to be the end point. For most American Jews, however, the intoxicating brew of freedom and acceptance has made America the final destination. In a clash of best friend versus brother, the best friend has won.
In my case, I can't say that yet. I still yearn to return to my biblical home. My American best friend might be charming, funny, successful, generous, loyal, and considerate, but my Israeli brother is still my brother. It's hard for me to dismiss the image I have painted in my mind of one hundred grandfathers and one hundred grandmothers holding hands in a windy desert, all of them my immediate family, all of them looking at me, all of them thinking of how lucky I am to have been born in the generation that came home to Zion.

Who am I to turn down this gift of which they dreamed for so long? Who am I to turn down my biblical destiny?

My life in America is really a double exile—the exile from the childhood memories of Morocco, which comes and goes, and the biblical exile to which I am obligated, which never leaves me. And yet, when I strip away the gravitational pull of exiles, transient and permanent, I'm left with the naked confession that America has strengthened my Jewish identity. How can that be?

I can understand why my ancestors in Morocco nurtured a deep Jewish identity—they had no choice. They were dhimmis (second-class citizens) in a foreign and often hostile land. What else could they lean on in their Jewish ghettos if not the comfort foods of Jewish rituals and tribal connection?

I am not a second-class citizen in America. No one is coming after me because I'm Jewish. No one will arrest me for criticizing the president. I am free and safe, whether I am Jewish or not. Like millions of Jews, I have discovered in America the freedom to not be Jewish. Some Jews have run with it; others have resisted. Count me in as a resistor.

There's no easy answer for why I have resisted assimilation, but the melodies of my childhood are a good place to start. In particular, I remember a certain melody on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year. At the culmination of the day, during the sunset prayer of Ne’ila, I would hold my father’s hand as all the men would gather in front of the holy ark, our prayer shawls covering our heads, stomachs empty from twenty-four hours of fasting, souls overflowing with emotion, all of us singing in unison to open the gates of heaven.

Through the hippie days of the late 1960s, the disco days of the '70s, the yuppie era of the '80s, the money-making era of the '90s, the insecure era around the turn of the millennium, and all my adventures in between visiting Zen camps and other places of youthful exploration, I never forgot that Arabian-tinged melody of Ne’ila, when I held my father’s hand and we sang our hearts out.
As I got older and learned more about my history, I came to understand that I was holding more than my father’s hand. I was also holding the hand he held when he was my age, and the hands of my one hundred grandfathers going back to the destruction of the Second Temple. Later, when I held my own son’s hand at that exact same moment of Ne’ila, I understood that I was also holding his son’s hand and those of future generations.

Human beings love drama. A great novel can’t exist without it; neither can a great film or poem or children story. The Jewish story is arguably the greatest drama in human history. Of everything I love about my tradition—philosophy, culture, rituals, values—the story itself moves my soul like nothing else. That may explain a key difference between the insular ghetto of my ancestors and the wide-open freedom I have in America. The Casablanca ghetto already had its own built-in drama. It was a drama of daily survival endured by second-class citizens in a foreign land. In the open and blank canvas that is America, I had to find my own drama, and what greater drama than the incredible story of my people? The irony, of course, is that it is an Arabian exile that helped connect me to my Jewish exile.

Maybe, in an odd way, I am just emulating my ancestors who fought for survival, only I am engaged in a survival of a different sort—a survival of meaning. The biggest fear that humans have, a rabbi once told me, is that their lives have no meaning. A blank canvas has no meaning; it is an invitation to start painting. The melody of Ne’ila helped me paint my way back to the story of my people. That melody was the river of meaning that flowed through me and through all of my wanderings and eventually led me to embrace an ancient story and make it mine.

Will the melody be strong enough to lead me back to Zion?

Would I have reconnected with my Judaism to the same extent had I made the biblical return to the immense Jewish neighborhood that is Israel? Would I have sought out the great drama of my people if I were already living in its place of destiny?

There are no ready answers, just intriguing questions.

What makes the American-Israel clash of exiles especially poignant is that they are both deeply Jewish. The American idea of a continuous work in progress, of an idea that never ends, of an idea “we turn and turn” and never stop turning even when we think we got it right, is an eternal Jewish idea. It is the never-ending journey of Talmud and Midrash. But the messianic idea represented by the return to Zion is also an eternal Jewish idea—the notion that we are working toward the spiritual perfection of humanity, that there is
a happy ending after all, an ending when goodness will rule the world. We are obligated as Jews to yearn for that day and to believe in it. It is the never-ending journey of the Prophets.

The reconciling of these clashing exiles may well come from another Jewish idea—the idea that exile, at its deepest level, is a state of mind. The Jews who have returned home to Zion must carry in their minds the humbling ethos of exile, lest they erode the Jewish ideals of empathy and gratitude. The Jews who remain in America have a different challenge. They must carry in their minds the drama of unfinished business, of seeing their one hundred grandfathers and grandmothers holding hands in a desert field, yearning not just to come home but to continue the chain.

What melodies and memories will help American Jews negotiate their exile and continue that chain? If we don’t have easy answers, we owe it to our ancestors to keep asking the question. In my case, I was fortunate to have a childhood melody that came with the warm hand of a father and the seductive sounds of the Arabian desert. The memory of Ne’ila was strong and sweet enough to help me continue the chain, hold tightly to my son’s hand, and pray silently that when his turn comes, he will do the same.
Notes

The first time my great-grandmother, Tavoos Merage Neek-Fahm, attended her own funeral, she was eighty-some years old and nowhere near ready to be dead.

She had received notice of her demise through the obituary announcements on Tehran’s state-controlled radio. With great sadness we announce the passing of our dear mother, Mrs. Tavoos Neek-Fahm, who bid farewell to the terrestrial sphere and set sail for the celestial kingdom on . . .

Tehran in 1964 was a city with nascent infrastructure. The telephone was a luxury saved for the wealthy and well-connected, radio was the primary means of mass communication, and “news,” once divulged, generated its own credibility and momentum. This particular report, of course, was a mistake. Tavoos (“peacock”) was a common first name, and Neek was a prefix to an assortment of surnames: Neek-Khoo, Neek-Nejad, Neek-Been, and many, many more. You couldn’t blame the poor radio announcer for a small slip of the tongue. In this case, reports of Tavoos Merage Neek-Fahm’s death traveled faster and more widely than usual because she was a celebrity of sorts and therefore known mostly by her first name. There may be many Tavooses out there, but to the vast majority of Tehranis of the time, there was only one Tavoos khanoon. By the time someone from dead Tavoos’s family got wind of the error and raced to the station to correct it, word of my great-grandmother’s extinction had spread around town and mobilized a good number of her acquaintances into making plans to attend the burial.

Tavoos khanoon—Lady Tavoos—was an Esfahani Jew from the Juyy Bar ghetto who had achieved, single-handedly and against formidable odds, the nearly impossible task of what today’s Americans call, casually and without a
second thought, “making it on her own.” Married at age nine to a much older, better-looking, and more charming man, she had borne four children, raised them in relative financial comfort till the youngest was a toddler, then upped and left her husband because of his many infidelities. This was in the late 1800s in one of the poorest ghettos in Iran. For a woman, divorce was a stigma more devastating than death. Add to that the fact that this particular woman was dark-skinned and therefore not especially desirable, had no useful skills and five mouths to feed but no money of her own, and you’ll begin to understand just how monumental a challenge Tavoos khanoom had taken on.

Sixty years later, she was a successful businesswoman with considerable capital and a steady income stream. You wouldn’t know it by looking at her, but Tavoos khanoom was a purveyor of precious stones to a host of wealthy but “selective” (a euphemism for “tight-fisted”) clients in the capital as well as other major cities. Her most important customer was none other than the dowager queen, wife of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the first monarch of a dynasty that would end with the fall from power of his son, Muhammad Reza, in 1979. Like all royals, the dowager and her entourage wanted only the best of everything. Like most royals, they were loathe to spend money on anything, given that they felt they owned the country and everything in it.

Unlike other successful jewelers, Tavoos khanoom never owned a store. She worked out of her clothes—literally carried her entire inventory at any given time on herself—and got around mostly on foot and sometimes on the bus. She went around in multiple layers of candy-colored clothes—orange and green and red silk or taffeta skirts with large pockets, embroidered cardigans that had seen much better days, and a white headscarf that she fastened with a safety pin under her chin and that set off her dark skin and protruding lower jaw in not the most flattering of ways. She stuffed the pockets of the outer layers of skirts with tissue paper and dime-store jewelry and other “foils,” tucked tens of thousands of tomans’ worth of real gems into the inner layers, and made house calls morning to night.

The only exception to this manner of conducting business was on the days when the royal court sent for her. On those occasions, a man in a dark suit and Steve McQueen sunglasses pulled up at dawn in a shiny black car, parked at the top of Khaakh Avenue with the windows up and the doors locked, and waited. Tavoos khanoom’s house was several blocks away, but she got word of the “summons” almost immediately because all her neighbors knew the car and whom it had come to fetch. She took her time getting ready, making a point of presenting her most elegant, palace-worthy self, but in the end the woman
who emerged from her doorway and marched up the street into the parked car looked or acted no differently from the Tavoos of every day. If you didn’t know her, you’d be out of your mind to think she carried anything worth robbing. But of course people did know her and how much she was—literally—worth on any given day on any given sidewalk. Why she was never robbed, at home or outside, had to do more with the caliber of customers she catered to—and the dread of retribution they inspired—than the smokescreen and disguise she employed.

But you don’t become a neighborhood icon and jeweler to the queen mother without having the ability to recognize an opportunity when one presents itself, and you don’t live to the ripe old age of eighty-plus without realizing that what people say about a person while she’s alive sometimes differs greatly from the narrative that follows her death. Given all this, and because she was a scorekeeper by nature, Tavoos khanoom decided to let the misunderstanding linger for a while longer. Instead of taking the initiative to make it known that she was, indeed, quite alive, she decided to drop in on her own funeral.

* * * *

A Jewish funeral in 1960s Iran was a community event. Like so much else in the existence of Mizrahi Jews, our rituals of mourning bore great resemblance to those of the Muslim majority among whom we lived. The communal aspect of funerals, their theatricality, the significance of public expressions of despair, so prevalent among Mizrahi populations of Sunni-majority nations, was even more accentuated in Shia-dominated Iran.

Perhaps the greatest metaphor for the importance of mourning for the Shia is the manner in which they commemorate the death of Imam Hussein on the tenth day of the holy month of Muharram. Ashura, as the day is called, is an occasion for self-flagellation and the shedding of tears. Blood must be drawn, worldly activity must cease, and pain must be inflicted, suffered, and—crucially—publicly exhibited. Believing that a single tear shed for Imam Hussein will expunge a hundred sins, they organize large processions of men dressed in black who wave black banners with expressions of grief written in Arabic, and sob like children as they march through streets and city squares, pounding their naked flesh with special chains with blades and striking their skulls with swords.

For the Jews, the size of the funeral party and the extent of misery they displayed was the final verdict not just on the value and significance of the newly departed’s life, but also on the level of esteem in which his or her family was held. Everyone who knew the deceased or had a (however tenuous)
relationship with the saheb azza—those who own the grief—would be in attendance and required to display acute misery. Women were expected to shed copious amounts of tears, wail loudly, swoon, and faint. A poorly attended funeral could be construed as a greater calamity than the death itself. To avoid such an occurrence, families hired professional mourners who specialized in beating their chests and throwing themselves on the grave. Afterward, during the shiva—a week-long period of formal mourning for the dead—the saheb azza would hold open house from dawn till late into the night and provide three meals a day plus a constant supply of black tea, dates, and peeled cucumbers. Everyone wore black—close family members did so for an entire year.

This emphasis on mourning was, in turn, the outward manifestation of a more critical aspect of the post-Islamic Middle Eastern psyche: the centrality of grief. Up until the middle of the last century, nearly every household in Iran put on display one or more tear jars. Made of colored glass and decorated with drawings and pearls and other ornamental stones, it was shaped like a genie bottle, with a long, narrow neck and a flat, round bottom. In times of grief, the saheb azza offered the bottle to the visitors to cry into. Having literally gathered the callers’ tears, the saheb azza would add their own, then cap the bottle and save the contents as a reminder of their grief. To this day, my mother and her sisters will tell you how, before she left her husband because of his meanderings, Tavoos khanoom cried all night into her tear jar and, in the morning, drank her own tears. Then she took her children and walked out, grief and all, into family lore. She was, literally, made in part of her sorrows.

For every gem she carried or sold, Tavoos khanoom had a story to tell. This ruby belonged to the wife of the governor of Shiraz; he gave it to her after he had ordered the execution of all the men in her family. This diamond has traveled thousands of kilometers from Africa; who knows how many men had to be buried for this marvel to be unearthed. This pearl . . .

For every gain, a loss; every fortune, a cost. That was the lesson in all those stories, what she had learned in her own life, the price she had paid for “making it on her own.” She left her husband but never forgot the pain of being betrayed. She did rise out of poverty to hold many assets, but remained scathed by the hardships and heartbreaks she suffered. She took pride in being a businesswoman but understood that to do so, she had largely neglected her children.

A petite, dark-skinned woman dressed up like a girl who has happened upon a treasure chest in the attic—that’s what she was: an anachronism equally made up of what she had accomplished, and what she had lost.
Perhaps the greatest collective loss for the Mizrahi Jews of the Middle East is that of home and country—one, in 586 BCE, when they were brought as slaves into Babylon, and again, in modern times, when they were driven out of what they rightly believed was their native land. The first time, they lost Jerusalem and were forced to settle in lands belonging to the Babylonian Empire. By the time Cyrus the Great overthrew the Babylonians, established the Persian Empire, and freed the slaves, many had embraced the region as their new home. In 583 BCE, when Cyrus encouraged the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple, about half chose to stay in Persia instead. Twenty-five hundred years later, when Arab Muslim governments expelled their Jewish citizens, they lost their homeland all over again.

Unlike those in Arab countries, Iranian Jews were not ordered to leave the country; they escaped for fear of their lives. Most believed that the departure was temporary. Nearly all identified as wholly and wholeheartedly Iranian. For us, there was no dichotomy between that and being Jewish, or between loving Iran and Israel at once. The history of antisemitism practiced by Shia clergy, the centuries of persecution and pogroms, the constant diatribe of “Jews are not real Iranians” reinforced our anxiety and kept us forever vigilant, often separate, but did not alter our Iranian identity.

We brought that identity, the product of that history, with us to the West. We brought our resilience against adversity, adherence to the Jewish faith no matter what the cost; we brought our resourcefulness and sense of survival, our appreciation of community and family, our love of education and respect for scholarship. And we brought, too, our grief over the loss of an ancient and cherished connection.

The day of her funeral, Tavoos khanoom embarked alone upon the hour-long journey from central Tehran to Beheshtieh—the Jewish cemetery. Since nothing began or ended on time in Iran, she planned her arrival well after the putative start of services—to make sure anyone who was going to be there had had a chance to show up before she took the tally.

On this occasion, Tavoos knew that her children and other close family, who were clued in to her continued residence in the terrestrial sphere, would sit out the funeral. But there were all the others—the myriad distant relatives, casual acquaintances, new and old neighbors; all the friends and relations of her four children and those of their spouses—literally hundreds of men and
women whose love and loyalty for her would be established or disproved depending on whether they attended the funeral and how passionately they mourned her. She arrived just as the rabbi was beginning the eulogy.

Even from a distance, she could sense the unease that hung over the funeral party at the grave site. Dead Tavoos was not nearly as well known and connected as Tavoos khanoom, so her—Dead Tavoos’s—family was mystified by the largeness of the attendance. They were especially puzzled by the presence of a very elegant, well-spoken, and perfumed contingent of women whose mannerism and speech gave them away immediately as Muslim, and who huddled together at a slight distance away from the Jews.

For their part, Tavoos khanoom’s mourners were wondering out loud why her children were not in attendance. Where, for example, was her handsome son, Manouchehr, who had never worked a day in his life but went around dressed like a millionaire and giving sizable tips? He carried in his coat pocket an airline ticket he said was for Hollywood, where he was forever promising to go, because, you see, he had a woman waiting for him—not just any woman, but the finest of them all, Elizabeth Taylor, the actress.

Where, for that matter, were her daughter Heshmat, with the rose petal skin and hazel eyes, her seven daughters, and blue-eyed husband? Where was Tavoos khanoom’s estranged husband, the tar player, Solomon Khan? He was a good man and a great lover, and he liked to spread the bounty around, to his own many wives and hundreds of lovers, and to other men’s wives as well, which became a problem every once in a while, like the time he was shot, at point blank, in the head, by an enraged husband. He lived to tell about it, physically unscathed because he was unusually strong, drinking down a dozen raw eggs every morning followed by shish-kebob for lunch and dinner every day of his adult life.

Then all at once, one of the distinguished Muslim ladies looked behind her, saw a vision resembling Tavoos khanoom ambling toward them, blanched and nearly choked on her own breath, and shrieked, “GHOST! GHOST! GHOST!”

* * * *

In the thirty-five years since the United States offered us safe harbor from the government of the mullahs, Iranian Jews have thrived, adapted, and succeeded far beyond what would have been possible in Iran. As with other immigrant communities, our presence has at once enriched and unsettled our host country. In Los Angeles and New York especially, where the largest concentrations
of Iranian Jews have put down roots, American Jewish community leaders, rabbis, and charitable and professional organizations have welcomed and embraced our presence. At the same time, our sudden appearance in the late 1970s evoked a good deal of resentment, even animosity, from the Ashkenazim. That friction persists today.

Some of the grievances are typical of what any immigrant group elicits: everyday habits that clash with the established norm, the tendency to congregate in specific pockets, to speak one’s native tongue. Some—disregard for the law, materialism, image consciousness—are society-wide issues not particular to any specific community. Like minorities everywhere, we are judged by our lowest common denominator, the sins of a few being held against the many. Like other minorities who’ve suffered persecution, we’re loath to air out our internal divisions for fear of inviting even greater oppression from the outside.

It’s a Jewish story, this eternal state of “otherness,” of being aware of the judgment of others—even other Jews—of wanting to prove oneself worthy of acceptance while remaining reluctant to assimilate. It’s what older generations of Ashkenazi Jews experienced when they first came to the United States and what many of their offspring now exert against a new generation of Jewish immigrants.

Here we are, a people who, until recently, had literally held on to tears shed in the past, suddenly uprooted against our own wishes and trying to navigate the land of *what doesn't kill me makes me stronger every failure is a step closer to success I will make lemonade out of lemons I will enter a new chapter of my life I will move across the world or across the country and start over.*

Here we are, a minority that for centuries was forced to remain insular, ordered by ruling monarchs or mullahs to live in ghettos, suddenly waking up among the most diverse population in the world.

Here we are, having survived millennia of adversity and hardship mostly by refusing to assimilate, suddenly blamed by our Ashkenazi cousins for not assimilating fast enough.

“When our grandparents came to this country from Europe,” so many Ashkenazi Americans have complained when addressing the subject of Iranian Jews, “they did their utmost to assimilate. They wanted to become American and for their children to be American. Iranian Jews, on the other hand, are reluctant to assimilate or to allow their children to assimilate. They keep to their own people, speak Persian even in the presence of non-Persian speakers, insist on keeping to their customs. . . .”
Whether first-generation European Jews were as eager, or able, to assimilate upon arrival in the United States, is debatable. So is the question of where that desired assimilation was to occur—into the existing Jewish community? The larger ethnic or religious groupings that constitute the majority in each state or region? Equally controversial is the question of the desirability and the extent of assimilation. What do we gain, and lose, when we give up one culture in favor of another?

Certainly, the American Jews’ mantra of “they should become more like us” presupposes that one group’s way of life and habits are superior to the other. It also requires a great deal of historical amnesia: What would have happened to the Jewish people had they assimilated into every culture, religion, and nation that became their home over time? What has happened, in contemporary times, to American Jewry as a result of ever-greater assimilation? Would it not be more ideal for our two communities—Mizrahi and Ashkenazi—to merge, rather than have one dissolve into the other? Isn’t progress a question of holding on to the good and shedding the undesirable aspects of humanity?

* * * *

Tavoos khanoom died in Iran on the day my daughter was born in Los Angeles. That was in 1988. Tavoos was well past a hundred, and would gladly have lived a few more centuries if the sleep didn’t take her. Toward the end, I’m told, she slept for increasingly longer spells until finally she didn’t wake up. I saw the coincidence of her passing and my daughter’s birth not as a continuation, nor a new beginning, but as an evolution of an ongoing tale. What I wish for my daughter, for all the children of Iranian Jews outside the country, is neither to repeat history, nor to squander an inheritance of history and tradition that, if used wisely, will enrich her life and enhance the contribution she can make to future generations.

* * * *

Iranian Jewish culture is a fusion of three thousand years’ worth of Persian, Jewish, and Muslim influence. We are, by any standard, a small minority within a minority: an optimistic estimate would place the total number of Jews of Iranian ancestry in the world at around three hundred thousand. Today, there are an estimated nine thousand to twenty-five thousand Jews still living in Iran (“Judeo-Persian Communities, i. Introduction”; Ben Zion), with another sixty thousand in the United States. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that what we lack in numbers, we make up for in individual achievement and collective
contribution. It would also be fair to say that, in the United States at least, we make ourselves more visible than our numbers intimate. But the real significance of Iranian Jews to the West is their hybrid identity.

Our identity as a people was forged as much by our Persian as our Jewish past. That we persisted in a single place of exile after the destruction of the First Temple meant we were spared the dislocation and cultural alienation suffered by other Jews. After Islam’s conquest and, especially, the establishment of Shiism, our traditions, habits, and beliefs were shaped as much by Persian Jewish culture as the predominant Shia practices. It is a unique sensibility, similar in many ways to that of other Mizrahi Jews who lived among Arab or Asian populations, vastly different from that of Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews of today. If there is value to be drawn from what Sir Edward Taylor defined as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Street), then Iranian Jewish culture in its current form in Iran, as well as in the United States, is worthy of safekeeping.

We are all, knowing or not, made as much of the past as of the present. As Jews, we all carry our grandparents’ tears from one house to another. It is true that a Mizrahi Jew born and raised in America, or even one who has spent a significant amount of time here, is an altogether different creature than one from Iran. That’s because she has so much less of the Iranian in her. But most American Mizrahis still value the past—sorrows, grief, and all—to a larger extent than their American Ashkenazi cousins.

For us, a funeral is still not the end of a person’s story; it’s the continuation of a tale that began hundreds of generations ago and still continues.

Because somewhere on a dusty hill in an old and overcrowded graveyard, the ghost of mothers past stands watching—layers of outdated and mismatched, decomposing cloth on the outside, pocketfuls of ancient, gleaming gems on the inside.
Works Cited


How does an architect from Tehran become a gallery owner in Venice, California? Like most journeys, the steps are only clear when glancing back.

**ART WAS MY FIRST LANGUAGE**

I was born to Younes Nazarian and Soraya Nassi in Tehran, Iran, and was raised with David, Sharon, and Sam, my siblings. From our earliest years, we were taught to appreciate the arts, to love the land of Israel, to value learning, and to engage in philanthropy.

My mother’s father, Shokrolah Nassi, was an antiques dealer in Tehran and later in New York. He often traveled to France and England to purchase European antiques to sell in the United States. He understood European, as well as Persian, art history. It was from my grandfather that I learned the art of storytelling. He loved Persian poetry and used it to teach his grandchildren lessons about life. Additionally, he was a violinist and his great passion was Persian music. From him, and the rest of my mother’s side of the family, I gained a sensitivity toward the liberal arts: poetry, storytelling, and traditional Iranian crafts, including weaving, pottery, and silver engraving.

My mother’s uncle was a well-known metal engraver named Ben Mayeri (b. 1914, Iran; d. 2003, US). Growing up in a family that was active in the business of importing and exporting fine art nurtured Mayeri’s talent for drawing, calligraphy, and languages. He founded a factory and was involved
Shulamit Nazarian

in designing, producing, and exporting metal engravings. This passion earned him international praise. He was acknowledged by National Geographic magazine and appeared in publications in Iran, Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany and was interviewed by radio and television personalities. His talent brought him prominence and garnered him a faithful following. His clients include the late Shah and Empress Farah Pahlavi, US Secretaries of State William Rogers and Henry Kissinger, CIA Director and US Ambassador to Iran Richard Helms, General George Patton, playwright Arthur Miller, Elizabeth Taylor, German actress Elke Sommer, and many other collectors from the US, Europe, and the Middle East. Additionally, Mayeri served as the leader of Isfahan's Jewish community. He helped manage internal affairs, serving as a liaison to the civil government and representing the Jewish community at official state functions. He used these talents to make gifts and ketubot (marriage contracts) for our family and relatives. Mayeri’s beautiful calligraphy, both in Hebrew and Farsi, is a continuous source of inspiration for my family.

My father’s background is in building and construction. His deep morality, business acumen, and commitment to creativity have played a pivotal role in shaping my outlook and my career. The legacy of philanthropy that he launched through the Y & S Nazarian Family Foundation inspires me and is reflected in the Shulamit Gallery’s commitment to building and strengthening the Iranian Jewish community.

My earliest memory of being exposed to art was in elementary school at the Etefagh School, a Jewish day school in Tehran. We did not study traditional art history; however, we had a wonderful art teacher who inspired me to look at the world and discover beauty in all my surroundings. This was a deeply powerful lesson for me, particularly because Tehran in the 1970s was overflowing with culture, tradition, and beauty. The homes of my family members and classmates were filled with fine Persian rugs, our everyday dishware and utensils were intricately decorated, and even our childhood TV programs were illuminated with bright colors, interesting characters, and vivid Middle Eastern motifs. I began to see beauty all around me.

My family immigrated to the United States on the eve of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, settling in Los Angeles. Like so many who fled, we left everything behind: rugs, pottery, paintings, and even family photographs, taking only what fit in our suitcases. As a young girl, it pained me greatly to think that all the beautiful things collected by generations of my family were lying in waste in a home and country that we could never see again. The trauma of our
flight affected me deeply and caused me to disconnect emotionally from my own heritage. It was only years later, through the interest of my non-Iranian classmates and parents’ work associates, that I renewed my interest and connection to my culture.

Because I was sixteen when we came to this country, I had two years left of secondary school. Starting at Beverly Hills High School was a new, overwhelming, and exciting experience. It was in the halls of this great public school, thousands of miles from my home, where I fell in love with architecture. I would continue these studies in college and graduate from the Pratt Institute in 1987 with my BFA, which exposed me to a variety of fine arts, art history, and theory.

Over the next two-and-a-half decades, several events guided my path towards becoming a gallerist. The first was watching my mother, Soraya Sarah Nazarian, begin to explore her own artistic practice. Her experimentation with stone carving opened up my family to explore contemporary art and inspired me to pursue my own dreams and talents, as she had done.

The second major event to impact me was my divorce. As a first-generation Iranian Jewish woman, I did not make the decision to end my marriage lightly. It took time for me to heal and to redefine my life as a single mother of three boys. Ultimately, however, I came to understand my own resiliency, and for the first time, I became comfortable with my independence. I realized that I have my own powerful story to share. Through one of the most tragic chapters in my life, I found my voice—from out of the darkness grew my brightest source of strength.

FROM COLLECTOR TO GALLERIST
It was my passion for art, architecture, and design that served as the inspiration to establish Shulamit Gallery. Before launching the gallery, I began independently exhibiting regional and international artists in my home in Holmby Hills, California. My beloved home, known as the Marvin and Sandy Smalley House, was built between 1969–73 by the noted architect A. Quincy Jones, and was featured in the Hammer Museum’s 2013 exhibition A. Quincy Jones: Building for Better Living, which was presented as part of Pacific Standard Time Presents: Modern Architecture in L.A.
During these early years, I was searching for my curatorial voice and message to the broader world. I realized through the first several exhibitions that I truly enjoyed working with artists and helping collectors discover new talent. There is something very powerful in connecting potential collectors or patrons with new works of art that move them. The more that I met artists, heard their stories, and witnessed their creative journeys, the more I knew that this was the path for me.

During this time, I met a truly remarkable man who would become a partner—in every sense of the word. Bruce Adlhoch, now my fiancé, is the owner of a major advertising and marketing company, Adlhoch Creative Inc. For the first time in my life, I had a truly supportive companion, and the impact on me was tremendous. From the beginning, he helped me to articulate my vision for the gallery. He supported me when I mounted my first exhibitions in my home. Later on, he offered his services as a creative advisor and helped me to develop the unique look and feel of the Shulamit Gallery’s public image and continues to support our marketing efforts. Most importantly, his enduring emotional support is a daily source of strength and inspiration for me.

In addition to Bruce, my early explorations as a gallerist led me to many wonderful partners and mentors. I became well acquainted with art consultants, curators, art historians, nonprofit professionals, and university faculty, including Lois Neiter, Adam Gross, Peter Mays, Gloria Gerace, Barbara Gilbert, Esther Netter, and Jocelyn Teltel. In 2008, I met Ruth Weisberg, who was then Dean of the University of Southern California (USC) Roski School of Fine Arts. It was Ruth who presented me with a major curatorial opportunity that would ultimately lead to the Shulamit Gallery. She asked if I would curate an Iranian Jewish exhibition for USC Hillel. I jumped at the chance. It was the first exhibition that I would be involved with that was inspired by my heritage.

As I began to research Iranian Jewish artists living and working in the United States, I was impressed by the magnitude of the work I discovered. It was amazing to me to learn of the number of Iranian artists and how many common themes became apparent in their diverse work, including a sense of reverence for traditional colors, cultural symbols, and Persian folklore. This vibrancy was often juxtaposed with the tremendous sadness of exiled immigrants, coping with the reality that they would never be able to return to Iran. There was a push and pull that I began to see in works by these artists, as they sought to celebrate their newfound freedom and yet missed a land in which they were oppressed, clinging to food, stories, and traditions that were familiar, yet also embracing American culture.
I titled the exhibition *Celebrating the Persian-Jewish Legacy*. It ran from March 5–May 20, 2010, at USC Hillel and featured the works of David Abir, Shahram Farshadfar, Mitra Forouzan, Krista Nassi, Soraya Sarah Nazarian, and Jessica Shokrian. These artists looked past the pain and trauma of being in exile and were motivated by the Middle Eastern value of *eftekhar* or honoring their heritage. They were celebrating Iran—past and present—while dreaming of a better future. Here the word “legacy” draws on the Jewish value of *l’dor v’dor*, “from generation to generation.” These artists were passing down a cultural legacy steeped with symbolism and meant to inspire a younger generation of Iranian Jewish students.

*Celebrating the Persian-Jewish Legacy* was also the first time I worked alongside my mother in an official curatorial and art management capacity. This exhibition inspired both my mother and me to re-examine our careers and consider our next steps together. The positive support from the Iranian Jewish community led us in spring 2011 to organize a retrospective exhibition and catalog of work by my mother, Soraya Sarah Nazarian. The exhibition and publication were titled *Strength Revealed: A 25 Year Retrospective*. This exhibition was guest curated by Barbara Gilbert, senior curator emeritus of the Skirball Cultural Center. Noted curator and art consultant Gloria Gerace edited the catalog.

*Celebrating the Persian-Jewish Legacy* and *Strength Revealed: A 25 Year Retrospective* were my first experiences in supporting the creation of exhibitions and programming outside my home. In both cases, I was overjoyed that the press, art world, and our LA-based Iranian Jewish community received them well. The USC Hillel exhibition provided a model for me based in a non-profit venue while my mother’s exhibition followed a standard commercial gallery approach.

My participation in organizing *Strength Revealed* was the first time I learned about what it takes to manage a commercial gallery. Alongside my mother and the guest curator, we had to develop gallery hours, hire staff, and guide visitors through the exhibition experience. We had to create sales, marketing, and press strategy. *Strength Revealed* was open for a total of three months. It was during these moments, as I watched my mother’s career reach new levels, that I began to dream of my own gallery.
VENICE, CALIFORNIA: MY NEW ARTISTIC HOME

In October 2012, I realized my dream by opening Shulamit Gallery in Venice, California. Located on the same block as the venerable LA Louver Gallery, I purchased the gallery property in late 2011. It has since undergone a complete renovation. In January 2012, I began to collaborate with LA art consultant Anne Hromadka. She helped me create a strategic vision for the gallery, and together we crafted the mission statement, identified the first group of artists, developed an exhibition approach, created innovative programming, and hired additional staff members. She and I worked closely for two years building the foundation for my gallery and together envisioning a place where our artists, exhibitions, and programs could have a lasting impact in Los Angeles and beyond.

Shulamit Gallery, Venice, California
The first floor is the official gallery exhibition space complete with a renovated, top-of-the-line fireplace and an adjacent Project Space. The Project Space, initially the building’s garage, was converted into a multi-use staging area for installations. The second floor includes a full-service kitchen, followed by a spacious office and lounge. The additional rooms consist of living quarters for artists-in-residence and offices for my staff. On a more technical level, the space was a residence from the onset, but drawing on my architectural background, I transformed the building into a more commercial arena, incorporating the warmth of the home in the gallery context. I strove to embrace the local Venice feel with a multilayered, clean, and contemporary twist.

I see this new art space as a venue through which we can expose others to contemporary Iranian, Israeli, and Middle Eastern culture. As such, the Shulamit Gallery seeks to engage Los Angeles locals through interdisciplinary exhibitions and programming, featuring artwork by emerging and established artists.

In the Beginning . . . Inaugural Group Exhibitions
Shulamit Gallery’s inaugural exhibitions were entitled *My Heart Is in the East, and I Am at the Ends of the West* and *Leaving the Land of Roses*. Both explored the contemporary Iranian Jewish story. They were held in collaboration with the Fowler Museum at UCLA, whose exhibit entitled *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews* was being shown at that time. The Fowler’s readapted exhibition, first organized by Beit Hatfutsot in Tel Aviv, focused specifically on LA’s Iranian community. Together, these exhibitions provided a survey of regional Iranian Jewish art. They tell the story of our continued cultural legacy.

Our first exhibition was *My Heart Is in the East, and I Am at the Ends of the West*. The exhibition title was inspired by Judah Halevi’s (b. 1086; d. 1141) famous poem, which beautifully captures the sense of loss and longing of a Jew living far from his ancient homeland.

Using the artists as my guides, *My Heart Is in the East* was a chance for me to explore questions of hybrid and multilayered identities: What does it mean to be in exile? What is our relationship to the city or country in which we live? Is it possible to maintain a positive national identity while fleeing persecution? Is the place in which one seeks refuge ever truly home? The work of Iranian Jewish artists, including Farid Kia, Laura Merage, Soraya Sarah Nazarian, and Jessica Shokrian, all attempted to answer these complex questions.

The Jewish community of Iran, whose lives and experiences were explored in this exhibition, is one of the world’s oldest Jewish communities.
During the early and mid-twentieth century, the Iranian Jewish community gained religious freedom, increased economic security, and experienced vast improvements to its quality of life. However, its acceptance proved to be fleeting and quickly evaporated during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Quite literally overnight, the majority of Iranian Jews fled their homeland for new lives in Israel, Europe, and the United States. From Great Neck, New York, to Los Angeles, California, new communities emerged that had to wrestle with their pasts and define a new future.

As in the romantic and relevant words of Halevi, the hearts of Iranian Jews continue to turn eastward. They embrace a nostalgic ideal of a birthplace where colors radiated with greater intensity, where flowers smelled sweeter, where spices were more alluring, where melodies could move women to tears, and where family was everything. Yet, here in Los Angeles—the literal ends of the West—Iranian Jews have created new lives for themselves and their children in the largest Iranian expatriate community in the world. Now, more than thirty years after the Revolution, they face the challenges that affect all immigrant populations: assimilation, acculturation, and intermarriage.

My Heart Is in the East, and I Am at the Ends of the West (2012), Installation View

This exhibition also included several historic pieces, which were displayed in Iranian homes and given as gifts to foreign dignitaries before the Revolution. They were given on loan from the collection of my uncle, Iranian
silversmith Ben Mayeri. The mixing of contemporary art and historic objects served to remind the viewer of nostalgic notions of home, and mirrored the display of cultural artifacts on exhibit at the Fowler Museum.

My Heart Is in the East, and I Am at the Ends of the West (2012), Installation View
Through our first exhibition, viewers were invited to traverse centuries of turmoil and discover some of the characteristics that make the Iranian Jewish story both unique and universal.

**JESSICA SHOKRIAN AT THE FOWLER MUSEUM AND SHULAMIT GALLERY PROJECT SUMMARY**

One of the ways in which the UCLA Fowler Museum adapted *Light & Shadows* for our Los Angeles Jewish community was to invite two regional contemporary artists to expand on its themes. I was pleased to have represented one of the artists, Jessica Shokrian. I worked alongside my curatorial team, the Fowler Museum staff, and with Shokrian to develop a multisensory interactive exhibition element. In retrospect, I believe strongly that this was the breakthrough work for Jessica Shokrian since it combined elements of her previous video, site-specific installation, and performance work to create a beautiful and holistic tribute to our shared culture.

*Jessica Shokrian, Shajhan in Wonderland (2012), Installation View*

Shokrian’s project at the Fowler borrowed from historic and current themes in participatory art. The goal was to encourage the viewer to interact
directly with her subject matter, joining in and activating the space to experience the sights, sounds, and scents of the Iranian Jewish experience. In service of this goal, Shokrian created an eighteen-minute, looping video. Below the video screen was a shelf displaying a traditional Iranian serving tray and a series of jars containing spices and other fragrant liquids. It is a well-known fact that our sense of smell is deeply linked with memory. The project capitalized on this idea by bringing to life the scents of the Persian market, holiday gatherings, and life-cycle events. Viewers were able to smell the fragrance of rosewater while it is gracefully poured into an open grave during a traditional Iranian Jewish funeral. They could smell her aunt’s spice rub while watching the aunt make pan-fried kebabs. For those familiar with these scents, each jar transported them back in time. Participants experiencing these fragrances for the first time gained a deeper understanding of the Iranian Jewish narrative.

Museum visitors are not often allowed to touch artwork. However, if given the opportunity to directly interact with art, it can be transformative. Allowing the public to touch and smell the fragrances selected by Shokrian created a shared narrative. It evoked associations between the viewer and the image. It created a poetic intimacy, capturing the complete sensory experience of the contemporary Iranian Jewish narrative.

Jessica Shokrian: Fowler Museum, UCLA

In an eighteen-minute video that spans fifty years of footage, artist Jessica Shokrian overlays portrayals of 1960s and contemporary Iranian culture in a format that mimics the cycle of life.

During the first segment, Shokrian shows us clips of the members of a nearby temple amid celebrations for the Jewish holiday Simchat Torah. Filtered atop this scene are images of text from the Islamic Quran, the Christian Bible, and the Hebrew Torah, essentially demonstrating that Iran was a place of many faiths.

Next, the Chief Rabbi of the Iranian Angeleno community sings traditional Iranian melodies while performing the Brit Milah, the Jewish ceremony for the newborn. Here again, we see two video clips playing simultaneously: one borrowed from the 1960s, the other from present-day LA.

Viewers then vicariously experience a day in the life of Shokrian’s aunt as she shops at local kosher marts for ingredients to prepare Kebob digi, a customary Iranian dish. Her aunt listens to Persian music, bringing tears to her eyes, as she reminisces about her past life in Iran.
Two weddings ensue with a parallelism similar to previous segments: Shokrian’s parents’ 1960s wedding and the recent ceremony of a cousin in 2009.

Lastly, in a somber funeral scene, the audience gets a glimpse of Persian Jewish mourning practices: the casting of flowers and the pouring of rosewater upon the grave.

All throughout, Shokrian chants a poem titled “Your Persian Bride,” referencing the role of the Persian matriarch—be it daughter, wife, mother, or grandmother.

_Your Persian Bride_
Dear Tehrangeles rich and scandalous
Oh Teherangeles my heart’s entwined
Dear Teherangeles some can’t handle us
Oh Teherangeles tell me why
Querido Teherangeles, ciudad de Los Angeles
My Teherangeles carpet ride
Dear Teherangeles Cyrus alive in us
Oh Teherangeles Esther cries
Dear Teherangeles the revolution ignited us
Oh Teherangeles though many died
Dear Teherangeles we made our exodus
Oh Teherangeles as the stars aligned
Dear Teherangeles you light shines bright for us
Oh Teherangeles now we kiss your skies
Dear Teherangeles lost and glamorous
One day, I’ll Be Your Persian Bride

_Leaving the Land of Roses_
_Leaving the Land of Roses_ was the second exhibition at Shulamit Gallery. Our Western notion of paradise and the imagery of the Garden of Eden find their origins within the innovations of ancient Iran—the word paradise itself stems from a translation of Old Persian _pairidaeza_ for the walled-in area of an enclosed garden. Travelers, merchants, armies, and missionaries would share tales of these beautiful grounds, which ultimately became associated with the idea of the Judeo-Christian origin story, sparking centuries of awe-inspiring horticulture and utopian myth.

Persia is said to be the native country of the rose. From there, the cultivation of these flowers spread across the globe, simultaneously moving east and west. This single flower has internationally and inter-culturally embedded
itself as a pervasive symbol. To those who have left this land behind, the scent is nostalgic. The extraction of rose oil originated in Persia; rosewater continues to play an essential role in cultural, culinary, and spiritual traditions.

Leaving the Land Of Roses (2013) Installation View

*Leaving the Land of Roses* continued our inaugural exhibition's exploration of questions of multilayered and ambiguous identities and the nostalgia for paradise lost. Drawing on the work of artists including David Abir, Krista Nassi, Tal Shochat, and Marjan K. Vayghan, this exhibition tackled the questions: What does it mean to long for your native land? How does scent or sound so vividly recall a forgotten or hidden memory? How do a people reconcile yearning for their homeland and its culture, even though they cannot return and have no desire to? How does a land that once inspired the vision of paradise become a place of such oppression and violence?

Krista Nassi was born in Iran and immigrated to Los Angeles after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. In her homeland, she had experienced political hardship; now, in an effort to dissect her understanding and disseminate her perspective, Nassi creates elaborate photomontages, manipulating their surface with ink and pigments. Within her works, Persian iconography is abundant. As she continues in pursuit of uninhibited creative ventures, Tehran’s Museum of Contemporary Art (TMOCA) as well as a select number of galleries throughout Europe have all collected her work.
Emerging artist Marjan K. Vayghan was born at the crossroads of Judaism and Islam and often explores this dual identity as a visual and performance artist. “Fly with the Cage” Legacy Crate, 2009, a kinetic audio and light installation, featured an altered shipping crate. Illuminated panels highlight images of Iranian mosaics. In her performance, the crate became a symbol of

*Marjan K. Vayghan, “Fly with the Cage” Legacy Crate (2009), Kinetic Audio and Light Installation*
her displaced heritage and immigrant narrative. The viewer was invited to enter the open crate and see the world through a kaleidoscopic view of her home, partake in familial and political dialogue, and join Vayghan as she explored her own history.

Tal Shochat, an Iranian Israeli photographer, was born in 1974 in Netanya, Israel, and currently lives and works in Tel Aviv. In a vivid review by *The New Yorker*, Shochat’s work is described as having a certain stylized, storybook quality that is reminiscent of Eden. Her images often create epic narratives, and this exhibition included new works exploring the roles of Iranian women as matriarchal figures. A line of poetry by a famous Iranian poet inspired each carefully crafted scene. Her works have recently been acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England, and can be found in the collection of the Jewish Museum in New York City.

David Abir, *Tekrar (2012)*, Installation View

David Abir, born in 1969, is an Iranian American sculptor. His project for the exhibition revolved around a set of fictional monuments viewed through a historical and archaeological context. The sculptures and installations were presented as “ruins” in a state of excavation. The essence of his work is a coded language of music that emanates from within, further shaped by the acoustic distortion and phenomena of the resonant inner spaces. Several ruins were on display in our Project Space as part of this exhibition. As of the spring of 2013, the first edition of *Tekrar Level Four* was permanently installed.
in Istanbul as a part of the collection of Ahmet Kocabıyık’a at the Borusan Contemporary Museum.

**East Meets West: From Artists to Exhibition Approach**

In March 2013, we mounted two exhibitions whose artists and approaches related to each other despite their very different backgrounds. It was the first time the gallery created an artistic pairing highlighting our various target audiences.

Doni Silver Simons comes from an Eastern European, highly religious Jewish background, and spiritual themes are often evident in her work. Pouya Afshar is Iranian from a Kurdish background. This pairing aligns closely with the mission and vision of the Shulamit Gallery as an innovative art space committed to engaging locals through cross-cultural exhibitions and programming.

Silver Simons earned her Bachelor of Studio Arts degree from the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and holds a Master of Fine Arts degree from Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. Silver Simons’ work has been shown in museums and galleries in the United States, Europe, and Israel, and her pieces are included in many private and public collections. She has recently shown in the Museum of Art, EinHarod, Israel; the Wolfson Museum, Jerusalem, Israel; and the Pacific Standard Time exhibition *Breaking in Two*; in addition, her documentary film *Omer 5769* premiered at

*Doni Silver Simons, Neilah (2007), Acrylic on Linen, 91.25 x 195.5 Inches*
the twenty-second annual Washington, DC, Jewish Film Festival in 2011. Across multiple mediums, Silver Simons explores the marking of time, identity, and memory.

Her artwork often explores how modernity confronts her religious identity. At times, her work is directly inspired by Jewish practice, as evidenced in her series of *omer* (the period between the holidays of Passover and Shavuot) or in her piece titled *Neilah*, created just before her work for *Kol Nidre* began in 2007.

Silver Simons’s exhibition *dé-noue-ment (n.*) included two seminal bodies of her work. The title referenced both the metaphoric and literal aspects of her work. Featured in our main gallery were three totemic works originating from the classic fairy tale *Rumpelstiltskin*. Together they took on the lyrical facets of storytelling as residuum of her durational performances. As part of her discourse, Silver Simons literally deconstructed her primary medium: the canvas. In a dramatic gesture, she unraveled her artwork—much like the miller’s daughter in the classic tale given the impossible task of spinning straw into gold. She displayed the fallen strands in various vessels and had created a video project looping the twine, drifting gingerly downward. It was these elements that suggested the exhibition’s title, *dé-noue-ment*, a term originating from old French, meaning “to untie” or “to undo.” The cloistered nature of the miller’s daughter resonated deeply with the artist, seeing her quest as a parable to the modernist ideal of the artist tucked away in the atelier, seeking revelation and creation.

*Doni Silver Simons, dé-noue-ment (n.*) (2013), Installation view*
The second body of work that was on display was Silver Simons's *Caesura* series from 2012. These two undertakings are linked by the artist's ongoing interest in literature. A caesura is the breath of air inhaled before the reading of a line of poetry. Here, the artist alluded to the primordial narrative of creation: breath, life, and water. Each melodic painting in the *Caesura* series referenced the California coastline, the ocean, and the tides. For example, *Tidal* and *Tied* depict washes of pigment. Embedded in layers of paint are references to the tide schedule, the lunar calendar, and waves crashing against the sandy shore. The subtle use of color creates a delicate juxtaposition to the monochromatic works in the fairy tale series.

Pouya Afshar moved from Iran to the US in 2000 to study film, animation, and illustration. His videos, new media installations, and figurative paintings have been exhibited widely in Iran and Los Angeles, including locally at the J. Paul Getty Center. He has received numerous awards and recognition from the Marc Davis Foundation and Walt Disney. Currently, he teaches New Media at the Art Institute of California.

*Pouya Afshar, The Mystery of Süveyda: Within the Artist's Mind (2013), Video Installation*

Afshar delved deep into the psyche of the artist and the immigrant in his media installation, entitled *The Mystery of Süveyda: Within the Artist's Mind*. In this work, Afshar blurred the lines between our conscious and subconscious. Creating a solitary room, he emulates the sensation of an artist struggling
with the limitations of his or her own imagination. In a theatrical way, Afshar opened up a fourth wall, allowing the viewer to step into a three-walled enclosure. Here, the audience was confronted by three images: a window looking out onto a faraway landscape, a fetus growing within a mechanized womb, and a running horse opened up to reveal the exposed tendons. These images projected on an imagined stone edifice are meant to be mysterious, overwhelming, and provocative. Reminiscent of a prison cell, the space invited the viewer to acutely feel the passage of time.

Once the viewer turned away from this walled room, the final element was revealed. Tucked away in the corner was a touchstone amid the surreal: a glimpse of the artist's studio, complete with desk, chair, and monitor. The participant was invited to sit and view several illustrative short films. Afshar, as artist and creator, highlights deeply buried fears, questions, and concerns. In the Sufi mystical tradition, this process takes place in the form of a small black dot upon the heart: the Süveyda. For Afshar, Süveyda is an atelier that seldom allows him to explore the depths of his being.

Viewed together, both Silver Simons's and Afshar's works examined our core understanding of the human experience through the investigation of the passage of time. Both explored the narrative traditions of folklore in Western and Eastern cultures. They delved into the metaphor of the artist cloistered in the studio—the familiar trope of the solitary figure, offering the viewer a unique window into the artist's subconscious. The Shulamit Gallery is a place where East meets West, where the Jewish and Islamic worlds encounter one another through their shared traditions and imagery, and I feel that this joint exhibition was one of our greatest successes thus far in making that vision a reality.

NAMING THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM OR WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?
During the first two years of running my gallery in Venice, I am grateful to have experienced much success. Like all small business owners and particularly those heading new start-up ventures, I’ve had my fair share of the expected challenges.

However, our gallery’s unique mission has led to a different and much more complex set of challenges, rooted in community and political dynamics that are much bigger than we are—among them the conflict between immigrant
and American values, the power of the Western-centric art world with its history of both xenophobia and antisemitism, and the complicated intra-religious tensions between the Ashkenazi and Persian communities in Los Angeles. I would like to take some time to address some of the issues highlighted by these challenges and where I feel we must go from here if we are to overcome them:

- **How do we as a community define what it means to be the provider for a family?**

For many members of the Iranian Jewish community, like many other immigrant communities, there is a fairly narrow version of what success looks like. In general, Persian parents have encouraged their children to enter into professions like law or medicine, or into business and entrepreneurship. These career paths are seen as ways to ensure the security of our families. I respect and understand this value. As a mother of three young men, I too want my children to be self-reliant, strong, and financially secure.

However, I feel that the cultural pressure to achieve financial success also has the effect of pushing the next generation away from participating in the creative fields. We must remember that, for centuries, our artisans were among the most valued members of our community. A community’s legacy and its strength are derived from its arts. It can and should be that way again.

Beyond our basic parental fears, we need to address gender biases. Far too often we expect our men to be the primary supporters of our families and to walk a well-worn path to conventional success. Our community has been more open to women artists; however, they are often accepted under the guise of a “hobby.” I have met with too many members of our community who define themselves as “struggling artists.” When I ask what that means to them, they often reflect not on financial deprivation, but on their struggle to be supported by their families, friends, and community.

- **What to collect?**

During a recent interview with an Iranian artist for a possible exhibition, the first thing he said was, “It is really refreshing seeing an Iranian gallerist and patron who is actually supporting Iranian artists.” This comment reinforced for me that artists in our community often feel unsupported, particularly by our own. On the whole, I have found that many collectors do not value or understand Iranian art, unless it can be tracked on the
Western market through a proven auction record. I understand that there is safety in collecting a modern master like Warhol or Monet, and that there is a certain cachet to having those well-known artists on one’s wall.

However, my hope is that more people will adopt a more regional and cultural approach to collection and art patronage. We in the Persian community should collect Iranian art, and we should care about art produced in our own region of the country. This is the art that tells our story. It depicts our pain and our success. It shows what it is like to long to return to native soil. There is a use of color and shapes that evoke memories only we share with the artists. We should revere the most talented artists among our community and support them by collecting their works, commissioning new projects, and inspiring museums to support our heritage and tell our stories. Good art is not just defined by how much a work will trade for at Sotheby’s or Christie’s. Our artists are talking to us, and it’s time we paid attention.

Next time you are at a museum, pay attention to whether the section dedicated to the Middle East is listed as Islamic Art or Middle Eastern Art. Exhibitions in major markets, from New York to LA and from London to Paris, are featuring Iranian and Middle Eastern artists at record levels. Examples include: Iran Modern at Asia Society in New York City, LACMA’s current exhibition Islamic Art Now: Contemporary Art of the Middle East, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London’s Year Light from the Middle East. Yet many museums still mislabel all art from this region as “Islamic,” rather than reflecting the true diversity of the Middle East. Calling all the works Islamic rather than by their proper geographic marker ignores the contributions of other civilizations present in this region, including those who arrived prior to the rise of Islam circa 630 AD.

While Iranian art is finally getting its time on the national and international stage, it is still not being seen on the same level as other non-Western art. This is just the beginning, and it will take time for Iranian art to provide staying power with collectors and museums. As momentum continues to build, I challenge the institutions and patrons to rethink how to classify these works.

Despite the growing attention, some emerging Iranian artists don’t want to be so identified. Among some of our most talented emerging artists, there is a great deal
of anxiety about being identified as specifically Middle Eastern or Iranian artists. They resist participating in Iranian group exhibitions or showing at Middle Eastern-focused galleries. They fear that doing so will permanently label them and perhaps make their work less appealing to collectors, museums, and curators on the international market. This is ironic as many of these same artists deal directly with their Iranian identity in their work. Yet the fear persists that by proudly identifying with their culture, they will wind up pigeonholed and unable to achieve their full potential.

- **I have modeled my gallery on my identity as a Jewish Iranian immigrant. However, I have learned that a hybrid mission at times can lead to complicated conversations.**

I knew before opening our doors that it was important to me to represent a whole picture of the Middle East at Shulamit Gallery, which includes Israel—a place that I care deeply about. And I knew that since I wanted to represent both Israeli and Iranian artists, it could get complicated.

Overall, our experience has been that we have found many wonderful program partners and artists who represent all aspects of our mission and who welcome the opportunity for dialogue and growth. However, we have found that some European partners and artists, particularly those who travel back and forth to Iran, have struggled with partnering with the gallery because of the language on our website and social media that includes clear mention of Israel and Judaism.

When confronted with these often-painful moments, it has allowed me to have nuanced conversations with the artists and potential partners. I try to point out how all our artwork carries power and meaning and that by bringing them together, we can break down long-held stereotypes. Nevertheless, it remains an ongoing challenge to find the balance that works for my company, my collaborators, and myself.

- **Since I opened my doors, I have received a steady stream of Iranian Jewish and non-Jewish artists interested in showing with me.**

This tells me a very important and clear message: A cultural space dedicated to the Iranian experience is needed in Los Angeles. There are an abundance of talented artists waiting to share their journey with us. I hope you will join me in supporting them and paying attention as they craft the next chapter of our cultural legacy.
IN CONCLUSION
My aesthetic perspective carries over into everything that I try to do, from running Shulamit Gallery to funding artists and creating community-wide programs. I have been blessed that our first three years of exhibitions and programs were well-received by the Los Angeles arts community and have paved the way for successful solo exhibitions by gallery-represented artists: Doni Silver Simons, Orit Hofshi, Gary Baseman, Jonas N. T. Becker, Pouya Afshar, Jessica Shokriyan, Inbal Abergil, Andi Arnowitz, Anisa Ashkar, Fereydoun Ave, Miri Chais, Kamran Diba, Sussan Deyhim, Melanie Daniel, Shahab Fotouhi, Carol Es, and Galia Linn.

In opening Shulamit Gallery, I have had a unique opportunity to reflect upon my lineage and family legacy. I have made it my mission to unravel that history and get to the essence of my Iranian Jewish experience—with all its beauty, cultural richness, and pain. I strive to raise awareness with regard to the feminist front in Iran. I make it a priority to encourage dialogue and spark debate. Bringing my knowledge into a contemporary context, I aim to share this wealth of inherited knowledge with friends, family, and the broader community, hoping that I will pass on my values and perspectives to a new generation.
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The Classic Sephardic Spirit

by Rabbi Daniel Bouskila

This essay is a personal meditation on Sephardic Judaism. It’s personal, because Sephardic Judaism is the Judaism I grew up with at home in Los Angeles. It’s personal, because Sephardic Judaism is what I represented for seventeen years on a Sephardic pulpit in Los Angeles (Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel). It’s personal, because in my current position as the International Director of the Sephardic Educational Center, Sephardic Judaism is what I write and lecture about in communities all over the world—from Los Angeles to Jerusalem. Above all, it’s personal, because Sephardic Judaism is something I deeply believe in as a way of life.

My parents were North African Sephardic Jews who came to Los Angeles in 1961. I was born three years later, making me a first-generation American. Growing up, we spoke French at home, and the Judaism we practiced was deeply rooted in the Moroccan/Algerian-Sephardic traditions that my parents brought to these shores. Despite being born and raised in America and educated in the mainstream Ashkenazi Jewish day school system, when asked about my Jewish affiliation, I never use the denominational titles common in American Judaism. Instead, I express my identity as a “French-Moroccan American Sephardic Jew,” or, in short, a “Sephardic Jew.” This description is born out of the unique form of Judaism that we practiced in my home. What was that Judaism like?

In the home where I grew up, denominational terms such as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Ultra-Orthodox, or Secular Zionist were not a part of our vocabulary. Jews were Jews. My family observed and respected our traditions, including Shabbat, holidays, and synagogue life. We were most likely considered “not religious enough” by certain people’s standards, but we were
unapologetic about who we were. We did not live our Jewish life to conform to somebody else’s opinion, nor did we change our way of life because a rabbi wrote an article or delivered a sermon deciding to impose new strictures on the community. We celebrated Judaism with a deep sense of commitment to the heritage and traditions of our family’s ancestors. We observed Judaism with warmth and beauty. Shabbat and holiday tables were adorned with the artistic grandeur and culinary magic that my mother brought with her from Algeria. We delighted in our spicy and aromatic foods, our spiritually uplifting tunes, and our lively stories. Our Judaism was characterized by its genuine joie de vivre.

A perfect example of this is our celebration of Passover at home. As a child, I knew that the Passover Seder in my home was different than that of my friends. “Our Passover Seder is translated into Arabic,” I used to tell my friends in school, knowing the shock value that created for Ashkenazi Jewish kids. “Arabic?” they responded in bewilderment. “That’s so weird! How could you translate a Seder into Arabic? What does it sound like?”

When my father split the middle matzah at the beginning of the Seder, it sounded like this:

Haqi da Qssam L’lah lb’har âla tnass l’treq ‘hin khrzeu zdoud’na min massar, âla yed sid’na oun’bina moussa ben amram haqi da n’khrzeu min had l’galouth amen ken yehi ratson.

Interestingly, I don’t ever remember asking my father to translate this. Only later, after my father passed away, did I research the meaning of this text. I discovered that this was a text unique to the Haggadah of North African Jews, and the reason it was recited during the splitting of the middle matzah is related to its meaning:

This is how the Holy One Blessed be He split the sea into twelve separate paths, when our ancestors left Egypt, through the leadership of our master and prophet, Moses son of Amram, of blessed memory. Just like God redeemed them and saved them from harsh labors and brought them to freedom, so, too, may the Holy One Blessed be He, redeem us for the sake of His great name, and let us say, Amen.

When I read it in English today, I understand what the original text means. But when I heard my father chant it in the original Judeo-Arabic, I connected to its deeper meaning, far beyond the translation of words. In a language whose words I did not understand, but whose pronunciation and music evoked deep emotions within me, this chant helped me learn the story of Jewish life in Morocco more vividly than any history book ever could. Hearing...
it evoked images in my mind of my great-grandfather Rabbi Yosef Pinto at his Seder in Marrakech, dressed in a jalabiya with a scarf on his head, breaking the middle matzah, chanting the same Judeo-Arabic text in the exact same melody . . . with my father as a young child at the table. Haq'ida Qssam L'ilah took me back in time to the Moroccan mellah (Jewish ghetto) of my father’s upbringing, a place I’ve only been to in my mind, but a place that I nonetheless could hear, feel, and even smell, especially at that moment. Hearing the Haggadah in Arabic removed me from my first-generation American milieu, and transposed me back to a place where a deeply spiritual Judaism was enriched by the cuisine, spices, music, and language of North African Arab culture.

During our Seder, we didn’t spend much time talking about our denominational “philosophy or ideology,” because we had none. Conversations about “right-wing ultra-Orthodoxy,” “liberal reform,” or “leftist secularists” were not a part of our Seder. Instead, we ate, sang, told stories, heard jokes in French and Arabic, laughed in good spirits, cried from emotion, and celebrated the beauty of our unique culture. Reading the Haggadah was not about debates and discussions, but more about celebrating family life. Our Seder was as much a cultural gathering as it was a religious observance.

This was not only true for Passover, but every Friday night, and every day of our lives as Jews at home. Our Shabbat tables—and our Jewish lives in general—were void of divisive denominational affiliations. When we discussed Torah, it was a nondenominational Torah whose teachings were meant to increase our moral and ethical character as people. Some may view all of this as naïve or simplistic. I view it as an “undeclared ideology,” one that was not born in conferences or conventions, but was naturally lived by thousands of Sephardic families over many generations. The great Sephardic rabbi and philosopher Maimonides, who encouraged Jews to live life in “the middle path,” inspired this rich and beautiful Jewish lifestyle. Maimonides’s “middle path” became the golden rule of Sephardic Judaism.

When I identify myself as a “Sephardic Jew” today, it is these very values handed to me by my parents that serve as my Jewish frame of reference. For me, the term “Sephardic” represents much more than my ethnic background. Sephardic Judaism informs my values, celebrates my culture, and invokes my deep connection to my ancestors’ customs and traditions. It also informs my rabbinical career, specifically how I study, teach, and practice Judaism within the complex denominational world of American Judaism.

My parents always told me that the rabbis they knew growing up were the unifying forces of their communities. Everybody respected them as gentle
sages whose leadership was characterized by wisdom, piety, and a genuine love for people. My parents often remarked that their rabbis seemed more modern in their outlook than many of the rabbis they met in the United States. Their rulings in halakha (Jewish law and practice) were both moderate and modern, they always expressed a genuine concern for social justice, and their sermons inspired unity and goodwill. Only when I started to study the writings of Sephardic rabbis did I begin to understand what my parents meant.

Rabbi Ben Zion Meir Hai Uziel (1880–1953), the first Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, was the embodiment of the Sephardic sage of my parents’ upbringing. A leading scholar and thinker, Rabbi Uziel’s multi-volume works in halakha and Jewish thought reflect the classic Sephardic fusion of traditional Torah with the modern world.

Rabbi Uziel introduces his nine volumes of halakhic writings by stating:

In every generation, conditions of life, changes in values, and technical and scientific discoveries create new questions and problems that require solutions. We cannot avert our eyes from these issues and say “Torah prohibits the New,” i.e., anything not expressly mentioned by earlier sages is ipso facto forbidden. A fortiori, we may not simply declare such matters permissible. Nor, may we let them remain vague and unclear, with each person acting with regard to them as he wishes. Rather, it is our duty to search halakhic sources and to derive responses to currently moot issues. (Mishpetei Uziel 1.ix–x)

One of Rabbi Uziel’s greatest students was Rabbi Haim David Halevy (1924–98). Rabbi Halevy served as the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv-Jaffa, and was the prolific author of multiple volumes on halakha and Jewish thought. Following the lead of his teacher, Rabbi Halevy wrote a legal position paper titled “On the Flexibility of Halakha,” where he wrote:

[Continuity of Judaism] is possible only because permission was given to Israel’s sages in each generation to renew halakha as appropriate to the changes of times and events. Only by virtue of this was the continuous existence of Torah in Israel possible, enabling Jews to follow the way of Torah. . . . There is nothing so flexible as the flexibility of halakha. . . . it is only by virtue of that flexibility that the People of Israel, through the many novel and useful rulings innovated by Israel’s sages over the generations, could follow the path of Torah and its commandments for thousands of years. (7.235–38)
Both Rabbi Uziel and Rabbi Halevy advocate for the classical Sephardic fusion of tradition and modernity. Unlike the liberal denominations of Judaism, they view halakha as a keynote feature of Jewish religious expression. But differently than the trend of strictness characteristic of Orthodoxy, they believe that the modern world and halakha are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are quite compatible. It is thus the responsibility of the rabbi to interpret halakha in a manner that reflects the meeting ground between tradition and modernity.

Rabbi Uziel commented on this in a broader sense:

> Our holiness will not be complete if we separate ourselves from human life, from human phenomena, pleasures and charms, but only if we are nourished by all the new developments in the world, by all the wondrous discoveries, by all the philosophical and scientific ideas which flourish and multiply in our world. We are enriched and nourished by sharing in the knowledge of the world. (Hegyonei Uziel 2.133–34)

Not only must halakha be compatible with the modern world, but so, too, must the Jew who lives in the modern world. Dating back to the Golden Age of Spain, the milieu of Sephardic Judaism always sought to embrace the wider world without losing its own uniqueness and traditions. This approach to life is one of the hallmarks of classic Sephardic Judaism.

In recognizing that there is a wider world than the insular Jewish community, Sephardic Judaism and its rabbis were well known for their concern for the social welfare of all human beings. Hand in hand with the internally Jewish system of halakha came a broader range of teachings that addressed the well-being of humanity.

Two outstanding Sephardic rabbis beautifully expressed this deep Sephardic value in the twentieth century: Rabbi Yitzchak Nissim and Rabbi Abraham Shalem.

Shortly before his death in 1953, Rabbi Uziel summoned Rabbi Yitzchak Nissim and told him, “You are the rabbi I choose to inherit my position as Israel’s next Sephardic Chief Rabbi.” Indeed, Rabbi Nissim (1896–1981) was elected Israel’s second Sephardic Chief Rabbi, a position he held for eighteen years. Throughout his term of leadership, Rabbi Nissim demonstrated a deep care for the social welfare of people from all walks of life. In a pre-High Holiday address delivered in 1963, Rabbi Nissim used the High Holidays as an opportunity to move society toward increased social justice:
The High Holidays present us with the opportunity for serious soul searching. Looking upon our situation today, I find it difficult to adjust to a society that lives life exclusively for the individual, void of caring for one’s fellow man. Let us look upon the underprivileged, the poor, and the depressed amongst us: have we sought to see and understand their suffering? Have we done enough to help them, educate them and uplift them, fulfilling to its fullest expression the commandment of “Your brother shall dwell together with you”? We must contemplate such matters on the High Holidays, searching deep within our souls for the way back to our cherished values of family, community and loving kindness. (24–25)

Rabbi Abraham Shalem (1928–2014) was this generation’s last direct student of Rabbi Uziel. A Jerusalem native, Rabbi Shalem served Sephardic communities in Peru, Seattle, and Mexico City, before returning to Jerusalem as a rabbinic research scholar and author. Like his teacher, Rabbi Shalem was a classic Sephardic rabbi who combined a deep knowledge of Torah, a vast erudition in worldly affairs, and a genuine love and care for humanity.

In his commentary on the verse “They shall follow God’s way, doing charity and justice” (Gen 18:19), Rabbi Shalem writes:

It is not sufficient to live by a dry and mechanical observance of Jewish law. We must impress upon all of humanity the importance of balancing human intellect with acts of charity and kindness, with teachings that reflect truth and equality, and with promoting a way of life that protects the human rights of all human beings created in God’s image, without discriminating based on race, color or creed. Repairing the world in the spirit of God, for the good of all of humanity, can only happen through loving our fellow man, protecting their human rights, and performing acts of charity and kindness, for this is the ultimate will of God. (3.112–13)

The combination of my Sephardic upbringing, my parents’ stories about their rabbis, and the inspirational writings of Sephardic rabbis all contributed to my decision to carry the torch of Sephardic Judaism in the United States as a Sephardic rabbi.

When I ultimately joined the ranks of the Sephardic rabbinate, I unfortunately discovered a shocking reality that was quite different from the Judaism taught to me by my parents, or of that reflected in the Sephardic books that I studied. The Sephardic rabbinic leadership abandoned the moderate teachings of their parents, and of Rabbis Uziel, Halevy, Nissim, and Shalem, favoring
instead the extremist, anti-modern, and isolationist ideology of Lithuanian ultra-Orthodoxy. This peculiar mode of Judaism is absolutely alien to the classic Sephardic tradition. Donned in black fedoras and black suits, a somber mode of dress as foreign to Sephardic Jews as the extremist ideology that comes with it, the majority of today’s Sephardic rabbis (and many of their followers) have veered far away from the traditions and way of life of their parents and grandparents. They have abandoned the tolerant, non-extremist philosophy of the rabbis and sages from their countries of origin, preferring instead to identify with the most extreme expression of Jewish factionalism. Rather than promoting a religious way of life that celebrates tradition, embraces modernity, and displays care and sensitivity toward all of humanity, they have chosen to denigrate their parents’ traditions as “not religious enough,” portrayed the previous generations of Sephardic Chief Rabbis as being “weak leaders” whose lenient rulings caused assimilation, painted the modern world as hostile to tradition, and expressed racist views contrary to the classic universalist viewpoint espoused by Sephardic rabbis. This is lamentable, because in a Jewish world whose denominational divisions have widened to extremes, Sephardic Judaism was once the enlightened voice of moderation, tolerance, and unity.

In an article titled “Can Sephardic Judaism Be Reconstructed,” the late Israeli sociologist Dr. Daniel Elazar concluded:

The revival of a living organic Judaism is the need of the hour in Jewish life. The best opportunity for doing so is through the Sephardic way. But can it be done? Only if there is a major effort to revive Sephardic halakhic interpretation, train Sephardic rabbinical leadership, and present the Sephardic way as an equally valid expression of Judaism. A major effort must be launched to reconstruct the Sephardic halakhic tradition and make it a living tradition with halakhic authorities addressing the great religious questions of our time in the Sephardic way. The restoration of Sephardic modes of teaching and learning and the establishment of educational institutions, particularly higher educational institutions, that will provide a home for those modes and train people able to express and continue the Sephardic way. (228)

I read Dr. Elazar’s article in 1993, just a year after it was published. 1993 is the year I entered the Sephardic rabbinate, and throughout my seventeen years on a Sephardic pulpit, I made every effort to teach and represent the classic mode of Sephardic Judaism taught to me by my parents, and by the Sephardic rabbinical books that I studied.
But I always felt that as long as the Jewish world lacked any formal institution that did what Dr. Elazar suggested, namely “to revive Sephardic halakhic interpretation, train Sephardic rabbinical leadership, and present the Sephardic way as an equally valid expression of Judaism,” the classic voice of Sephardic Judaism would disappear permanently.

After seventeen years on a Sephardic pulpit, I decided to pursue Dr. Elazar’s vision of “the restoration of Sephardic modes of teaching and learning and the establishment of educational institutions, particularly higher educational institutions, that will provide a home for those modes and train people able to express and continue the Sephardic way.”

In 2010, I joined the Sephardic Educational Center (SEC), an international educational and cultural organization with its own historic campus in the Old City of Jerusalem. Founded in 1979 by the late Dr. Jose Nessim, the Sephardic Educational Center—with branches in Los Angeles, New York, Miami, Seattle, Mexico City, and Buenos Aires—sought to teach the Sephardic way of life to young Jews. Through its trips to Israel, headquartered at its campus in the Old City of Jerusalem, the Sephardic Educational Center succeeded in educating and inspiring thousands of young Jews toward the classic Sephardic way of life. But something was sorely missing, for once these young Jews returned to their communities abroad, with rare exception, they could not find communities whose rabbinical leaders reflected the values and philosophy of classic Sephardic Judaism. Instead, they found Sephardic rabbis whose dress code and philosophy mimicked Lithuanian ultra-Orthodoxy.

Dr. Nessim shared this concern with me on several occasions, and like me, he dreamed of opening a rabbinical program that would revive the classic Sephardic spirit. When I joined the Sephardic Educational Center, I laid out a vision that would ultimately pave the way toward the creation of a Sephardic rabbinical program on the Sephardic Educational Center’s campus in Jerusalem.

That vision is approaching its realization, for in September 2015, the first class of students will begin their studies in a new Sephardic rabbinical program in Jerusalem. This program is being created through a newly forged partnership between the Sephardic Educational Center and the Alliance Israélite Universelle, an organization with an illustrious history of education throughout the Sephardic world.

It is more than symbolic that the program’s home will be the Sephardic Educational Center’s campus in the Old City of Jerusalem. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the buildings now owned by the Sephardic
Educational Center once housed a Sephardic Talmud Torah for children and Yeshivat Tifereth Yerushalayim, a Sephardic rabbinical school whose curriculum and philosophy expressed the classic Sephardic spirit. The most famous student, teacher, and headmaster of Tifereth Yerushalayim was a young Rabbi Ben Zion Meir Hai Uziel, who would ultimately become the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel.

In our desire to restore the crown to its former glory, the new rabbinical program will be named Midrash Shaarei Uziel: An Institution for Rabbinic Leadership in the Classic Sephardic Spirit. As in the past, the curriculum and philosophy of the new Midrash Shaarei Uziel will express the classic Sephardic spirit, with the goal of educating and training rabbinical leaders who will revive the authentic voice of Sephardic Judaism in communities all over the world.

The naming of the program Midrash Shaarei Uziel transcends the historical connection to the buildings where Rabbi Uziel once studied and taught. A halakhic scholar who fully embraced modernity, and a leader who sought to build bridges between peoples of all faiths, Rabbi Uziel was the quintessential classic Sephardic Chief Rabbi of the modern era. His spiritual way of life serves as the greatest model of how classic Sephardic Judaism can impact today’s divided Jewish world, especially when it comes to his tireless efforts on behalf of Jewish unity.

Rabbi Uziel envisioned rabbinic leaders whose communal work would be characterized by promoting a nondenominational Jewish unity:

We must remove this divisiveness that plagues us, and instead make our work as a community a reflection of peace and love. But who will stand and lead this change amongst us? This specific task belongs to the “Faithful in Israel,” our rabbinic and spiritual leaders. This belongs to them, because the Torah is not an alienating force; rather it is a force that brings people closer together. It is time that our rabbis and spiritual leader unite forces in their sacred work, and unite the entire Nation of Israel around them. Such unity, of spiritual leaders working together, unifying our people as one, will serve as our greatest source of comfort and strength. (Shabbat U-Moed 2.324)

Indeed, Jewish unity was Rabbi Uziel’s ultimate goal, as expressed in the Spiritual Will to the Jewish People that he composed just a few weeks prior to his death in 1953. The closing words of Rabbi Uziel’s Spiritual Will have been adopted by Midrash Shaarei Uziel as our guiding principle in restoring to the Jewish world the nondenominational mode of Sephardic Judaism:
Preserve with absolute care the peace of our nation and of our state—“And you shall love truth and peace” (Zechariah 8:19)—because disputes and divisiveness are our most dangerous enemies . . . they are like moths on the House of Jacob, causing our bones to rot. By contrast, peace and unity are the eternal foundations for the national sustenance of the House of Israel. Therefore remove all causes of divisiveness and disputes from our camp and our state, and place in their stead all factors that will lead to peace and unity amongst us. (Hegyonei Uziel 13)

The Jewish world needs a Sephardic renaissance. A revival of the enlightened teachings of Rabbis Uziel, Nissim, Halevy, and Shalem (amongst many other Sephardic luminaries) can help restore a way of life where tradition, modernity, culture, and social justice harmoniously coexist, and where the goal of Jewish unity trumps denominationalism. From Jerusalem to Los Angeles, the “Classic Sephardic Spirit” can re-energize our synagogues, our schools, and the most cherished institution from my Sephardic upbringing: our Shabbat and holiday tables.
Works Cited

About the Contributors

**AVIVA BEN-UR** is Associate Professor in the Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where she teaches a wide range of courses, including Jewish history and the history of slavery. She is author of *Sefardi Jews in America: A Disporic History* (New York: New York Univ., 2009) and co-author, with Rachel Frankel, of *Remnant Stones: The Jewish Cemeteries of Suriname* (New York: HUC, 2009); and *Epitaphs and Remnant Stones: The Jewish Cemeteries and Synagogues of Suriname: Essays* (New York: HUC, 2012). Her current book project is titled *Jewish Autonomy in a Slave Society: Suriname, 1651–1863*.

**LISA ANSELL** is Associate Director of the Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life at the University of Southern California. She received her BA in French and Near East Studies from UCLA and her MA in Middle East Studies from Harvard University. She was the Chair of the World Language Department of New Community Jewish High School for five years before coming to USC in August, 2007. She currently teaches Hebrew language courses at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

**RABBI DANIEL BOUSKILA** is the Director of the Sephardic Educational Center (SEC), an international educational and cultural organization dedicated to strengthening Jewish identity for youth and young adults, and to building a new generation of spiritual and community leaders. Through various innovative programs at the SEC’s historic campus headquartered in the Old City of Jerusalem, and in different communities in the diaspora, Rabbi Bouskila is developing the SEC into a Sephardic think tank that explores the unique halakhic and philosophic worldview of Classic Sephardic Judaism. He spends significant time in Israel throughout the year, developing, leading and teaching in SEC programs. He earned his BA in History from the University of California, Los Angeles and Rabbinic Ordination from Yeshiva University in New York. He also studied at Yeshivat Kerem B’Yavneh in Israel for two years, served in the IDF’s Givati Infantry Brigade for one year, and studied at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for one year. He was a pulpit rabbi and high school Judaic Studies instructor for seventeen years, continues to teach rabbinic courses in the US and Israel, and contributes articles regularly to many different publications. Rabbi Bouskila lives in Los Angeles with his lovely wife Peni, and together they are the proud and loving parents of their beautiful kids, Shira (eighteen) and Ilan (fifteen).
MOLLY FITZMORRIS is a second-year PhD student in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Washington. She studies sociolinguistics, with a focus on Seattle Ladino. She completed her MA in Hispanic Studies at the University of Washington and her BA in Latin American Studies at New York University. Molly has spent time in Buenos Aires studying the Ladino spoken there, and has worked closely with the Ladino-speaking community in Seattle, both for her research, and to organize Seattle's first two International Ladino Day celebrations.

BRYAN KIRSCHEN is an Assistant Professor of Hispanic Linguistics at Binghamton University. He received his doctorate from the University of California, Los Angeles, where he taught a variety of courses in Spanish and offered weekly language workshops in Judeo-Spanish. During his time at UCLA, Kirschen co-founded and directed ucLADINO, a student organization aimed at promoting the use and knowledge of Judeo-Spanish. He also served as the Jack H. Skirball Fellow in Modern Jewish Culture, teaching courses at the Skirball Cultural Center on Sephardic language and culture. He was also the Maurice Amado Senior Fellow, organizing international annual symposia on Judeo-Spanish language, culture and history. Kirschen's current research focuses on language contact between Judeo-Spanish and Spanish-speaking communities in the United States. He is the editor of Judeo-Spanish and the Making of a Community (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2015), as well as the co-director of Saved by Language, a documentary exploring how the use of Judeo-Spanish helped a young Bosnian child survive the Holocaust.

DEVIN E. NAAR is the Marsha and Jay Glazer Chair in Jewish Studies, Chair of the Sephardic Studies Program, and Assistant Professor of History at the University of Washington. Naar received his BA in History (summa cum laude) from Washington University in St. Louis and his PhD in History from Stanford University. He teaches courses in Jewish history and culture, the Holocaust, the Ottoman Empire and Greece, and Sephardic Studies. His forthcoming book, Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and the Greek Nation-State, will appear in 2016.

GINA NAHAI is a best-selling author, columnist, and professor of Creative Writing at USC. Her novels have been translated into eighteen languages, and have been finalists for the Orange Award, the IMPAC Award, the Harold J. Ribalow Award, and the Jewish Book Council’s Fiction Award. She is the winner of the Los Angeles Arts Council Award, the Persian Heritage Foundation’s Award, The Simon Rockower Award, and the Phi Kappa Phi Award. Her writings have appeared in numerous national and international publications, as well as in a number of literary and academic journals and anthologies. She writes a monthly column for the Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles, and is a three-time finalist for an LA Press Club Award. Nahai holds a BA and a Masters degree in International Relations from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a
Master of Professional Writing from the University of Southern California. Her latest novel, *The Luminous Heart of Jonah S.*, was a finalist for the Jewish Book Council’s fiction award in 2014.

**SHULAMIT NAZARIAN**, former architect turned gallery owner, began independently exhibiting and supporting artist projects in 2006. Shulamit officially founded Shulamit Gallery in 2012. Ms. Nazarian’s passion for art anchored in diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds was the basis for her inspiration, following the ideal of artistic practice as holding the keys to our heritage and shaping the landscape and climate of the world we live in. Ms. Nazarian is a strong believer in the notion of complex identity politics—spreading individualism while contributing to a collective consciousness. In addition to her role as Gallery Director, Shulamit Nazarian is an active philanthropist both in the local Los Angeles art community as well as internationally. She is a trustee of the Farhang Foundation, a group promoting Iranian arts and culture in Los Angeles, a member of LACMA’s Art of the Middle East Council (AMEC) and member of Tate’s Middle Eastern Acquisition Committee.


**SABA SOOMEKH** is the Associate Director of Research for the University of California, Los Angeles’ Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies. Professor Soomekh’s research concentrates on Iranian Jewish ethnography, gender/sexuality studies, and Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry. Professor Soomekh is the author of the book *From the Shahs to Los Angeles: Three Generations of Iranian Jewish Women between Religion and Culture* (New York: State Univ. of New York, 2012). Her book was awarded the Gold Medal in the 2013 Independent Publisher Book Award in the Religion category. Dr. Soomekh was the Exhibition Coordinator of the exhibition at the Fowler Museum at UCLA entitled: *Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews.*
DAVID SUISSA is president of Tribe Media/Jewish Journal in Los Angeles, where he has been writing a weekly column on Jewish issues since 2006. In 2014, he was awarded first prize for editorial writing by the American Jewish Press Association, and in 2009, he won the “Best Columnist” award by the Los Angeles Press Club. He has also been named one of the top fifty Jewish leaders of North America by the Forward newspaper. Prior to Tribe Media, David was founder and CEO of Suissa/Miller, a marketing company that was named Agency of the Year by USA Today. He sold the company in 2005 to devote himself full-time to the Jewish world. David was born in Casablanca, Morocco, and moved with his family to Montreal, Canada in the mid-1960s. He graduated from McGill University in 1978 with a degree in Economics and Marketing, and began his career with Procter and Gamble in Toronto, where he became their youngest brand manager. He lives in a very Jewish neighborhood of Los Angeles that often brings back memories of his Jewish neighborhood in Casablanca.

JOYCE ZONANA is the author of a memoir, Dream Homes: From Cairo to Katrina, an Exile’s Journey (New York: Feminist, 2008). She is a professor of English at Borough of Manhattan Community College where she has taught since 2006. A regular contributor of book reviews and essays to Sephardic Heritage Update and Nola Diaspora, she has published numerous articles in such journals as Signs, Meridians, Journal of Narrative Technique, and The Hudson Review. She is currently at work on a translation of Henri Bosco’s Malicroix.
The American Jewish community has played a vital role in shaping the politics, culture, commerce and multiethnic character of Southern California and the American West. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, when entrepreneurs like Isaias Hellman, Levi Strauss and Adolph Sutro first ventured out West, American Jews became a major force in the establishment and development of the budding Western territories. Since 1970, the number of Jews in the West has more than tripled. This dramatic demographic shift has made California—specifically, Los Angeles—home to the second largest Jewish population in the United States. Paralleling this shifting pattern of migration, Jewish voices in the West are today among the most prominent anywhere in the United States. Largely migrating from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the East Coast of the United States, Jews have invigorated the West, where they exert a considerable presence in every sector of the economy—most notably in the media and the arts. With the emergence of Los Angeles as a world capital in entertainment and communications, the Jewish perspective and experience in the region are being amplified further. From artists and activists to scholars and professionals, Jews are significantly influencing the shape of things to come in the West and across the United States. In recognition of these important demographic and societal changes, in 1998 the University of Southern California established a scholarly institute dedicated to studying contemporary Jewish life in America with special emphasis on the western United States. The Casden Institute explores issues related to the interface between the Jewish community and the broader, multifaceted cultures that form the nation—issues of relationship as much as of Jewishness itself. It is also enhancing the educational experience for students at USC and elsewhere by exposing them to the problems—and promise—of life in Los Angeles’ ethnically, socially, culturally and economically diverse community. Scholars, students and community leaders examine the ongoing contributions of American Jews in the arts, business, media, literature, education, politics, law and social relations, as well as the relationships between Jewish Americans and other groups, including African Americans,
Latinos, Asian Americans and Arab Americans. The Casden Institute’s scholarly orientation and contemporary focus, combined with its location on the West Coast, set it apart from—and makes it an important complement to—the many excellent Jewish Studies programs across the nation that center on Judaism from an historical or religious perspective.

For more information about the USC Casden Institute, visit www.usc.edu/casdeninstitute, e-mail casden@usc.edu, or call (213) 740-3405.