The Secret to a Successful Sephardic Community

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When Rabbi Solomon Maimon returned to Seattle in 1944 from Yeshiva University in New York, where he had been the first Sephardic rabbi ordained in the United States, the Jewish community looked quite different than it does today. Clustered in the Central District of the city, the community was split down Ashkenazic-Sephardic lines. Life congregated around the synagogues, and families—embracing the free public school opportunities—had the option of sending children to the Seattle Talmud Torah two or three times a week for a supplemental religious education. It was also a time of rapid Americanization, as seen in the conscious shift away from the Ladino language in favor of English.

Rabbi Maimon, who came as a young boy with his family from Tekirdag, Turkey, in the 1920s, became instrumental in building a sustainable environment for Sephardic life to flourish. His recipe for success never changed: engage the kids, hire good teachers, and, “if it costs too much, you’re going to get the board

yelling at you.” Notably, he also succeeded at understanding and working with the Sephardim of Seattle on their varied levels of religiosity without compromising his own commitment to halakha. As a result, the Seattle community today is diverse, welcoming, and more or less unified, in which many define themselves not by denominations, but simply as proud Sephardic Jews. In the living room of his modest home facing Sephardic Bikur Holim Congregation in Seward Park, where he held the pulpit until 1984, Rabbi Maimon, now 96, reflected on the early part of his career.

A stopover in Detroit on his way home from New York in 1944, where he had spent eight years studying at Yeshiva University, inspired Rabbi Maimon to return home and be a leader of Seattle’s Sephardic community. “The situation here was that they had nice people, but not trained as rabbis or hazzanim,” he said. “Some of them had enough education to teach. They wanted to keep the Sephardic community alive with its own hazzanim. Detroit happened to be one of the communities that had wonderful rabbis, a wonderful Day School. I said, ‘That’s it, when I get to Seattle, I’m going to try to be their rabbi.’” He proposed to the Seattle leaders that they give him a chance for two years. “I’m going to try to concentrate on the youth,” he told them. “If you think I’m doing well and you want me to continue, fine.”

Rabbi Maimon was hired by Sephardic Bikur Holim almost immediately, a position originally held by his father, Rabbi Abraham Maimon. He got to work engaging the kids with Sunday trips and lessons; and soon after, he was among the initiators of the first Jewish Day School in Seattle. The resistance was mighty, though: The new Americans valued the free public schools. Public education was a part of becoming an American.
“If you want to stay Jewish and be Jewish and learn Jewish, there’s only one way,” Rabbi Maimon said. He speculates that had he not come to Seattle and pushed for a structured Jewish education, half of the children growing up in the community and in public schools would have made haste for a Reform of Conservative congregation—or for no religious community at all. “The only ones that would stay would be the ones who like to read,” he said. “This way, everybody stayed. I said, ‘We’re going to prove to everybody that this is the way to go. We’re going to teach the boys and girls so much Hebrew in the first six months that we’re going to make a play in Hebrew.’ They did their job.” He remembers the audience’s astonishment at the students’ Hebrew production. “The guy who was against me, he says, ‘You won, Rabbi. In fact, I’d like to be the president of the school.’ I said, ‘You’re welcome. You deserve it.’”

In 1947, the city saw the opening of the Seattle Hebrew Day School in the Seattle Talmud Torah building at 25th and Columbia, and around 1974, the school moved to its current home in a stately old building eventually bought from the Sisters of the Sacred Heart. In 1969, the school changed its name to Seattle Hebrew Academy, and it remains a prominent K–8 Day School. “Only good teachers, that’s the secret,” he said. “Never mind how important they are, or how they look. Everybody in the school has to be a good teacher. You have the neshama of the kid, and if you’re not a good teacher, forget it.”

Around 1956, Rabbi Maimon moved forward with his next plan to engage the youth with Jewish life, and he launched the first Sephardic Jewish camp for three days on Vashon Island, a short ferry ride from Seattle, at a Baptist retreat site. “The best thing I did in my life was to start the summer camp,” he said. “Everybody loved the summer camp. The Reform and Conservative already had camping. I said, ‘They are smart people.’”

The camp, being Christian, could have been an obstacle, but Rabbi Maimon pushed past it. “We went to Vashon, and we saw crosses on some of the buildings,” he recalled. “The other rabbis turned around and said, ‘Not for me.’ It’s okay for me; it’s only wood, you know. I said, this is it, we have to go here all the time, and we eventually got two weeks. In this Baptist campground, we’re going to teach our kids something Jewish.”

He reminisced about the stunts they pulled to excite the kids. “We had one fellow who was in the Navy,” he recalled. “I said, ‘You know what’s going to happen Friday? He said, ‘No.’ I said, ‘You’re going to take your helicopter, and we’re going to buy a bunch of candy.’” According to his story, before Shabbat came in, the young soldier circled above the camp and tossed candy down to the kids.

But the two weeks spent at camp were not just thrilling for the children. “We had the involvement of all the older women, the old tias [aunts]. They wanted to come and do all the cooking,” Rabbi Maimon said with a laugh. “One Friday morning, [some kids] caught fish. We said, ‘Good, give it to the ladies; they’ll cook it.’ And the ladies cooked it. They caught their own Shabbat meal. Imagine that!” Rabbi Maimon repaid the women for all their help at camp, by offering them lessons in Hebrew and other subjects, resulting in a graduation ceremony. “The ladies had so much fun, they didn’t sleep much.” Sephardic Adventure Camp continues to thrive today, meeting for two weeks each summer—although the camp has long since changed locations, and will start a new chapter in Mount Rainier National Park this summer.

Members of Seattle’s Sephardic community occasionally reflect on a time when the synagogues held dances for the youth—something taboo today. Rabbi Maimon wasn’t sure that coed programming was right, but he knew it was what he had to do to get the kids coming back. He offered a story about a Sukkot event, where he ordered the youth to go to a dance in the social hall. “‘I’m going to lock it, and nobody gets out until they have a date,’” he recalled. “That’s what happened. They came for Sukkot, they got a date, they had a dance afterward, and we served them good stuff.” It’s a powerful example of the rabbi meeting the community where it was and seeking a creative solution to the never-ending problem of Jewish dating. “On Yom Kippur I repented,” he said. “I told God, ‘I’m wrong, but you put me in charge here, and I say, I have to do wrong to get right.’ It’s going to bring them together to marry each other, and that’s what they did.”

To this day, children lead the Simhat Torah services in both Sephardic congregations in Seattle, a custom that Rabbi Maimon initiated. With the help of his leadership and philosophy, Seattle’s Sephardic community is not just a place with a few Sephardic synagogues, but rather a place with a vibrant Sephardic intellectual and religious community, which is cohesive and resists falling into denominational categories. Rabbi Maimon credits that original stop in Detroit with this success. Other cities with Sephardic communities are not nearly as active because they lacked that engagement with children, he claims.

To drive the point home, Rabbi Maimon recalled a baseball game he once organized. It was parents against kids. “I was with the kids,” he said. “What happened? I hit a home run. They’re still chasing the ball. If you know how to play with them, you’ve got it made. That’s it, my dear. Every place that didn’t follow that strategy, they’re having problems.”