Giving Sephardi History and Culture a Voice….At Last

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Last week, history was made in a manner of speaking, as a Ministry of Education Committee, tasked with empowering Sephardi and Mizrahi cultural studies and history within the general education curriculum, led by Israel Prize laureate Erez Biton, handed its recommendations to Education Minister Naftali Bennett.

While for many, this will barely merit a blip on their radar, for the millions of Jews of Sephardi or Mizrahi background, it is a day that has finally arrived, albeit 68 years too late.

Statistically, every other Jew in Israel comes from the Middle East or North Africa and when the Jews of Morocco, Iran, Spain, Portugal, Yemen, Greece, Afghanistan, Egypt and other places throughout the Sephardi and Mizrahi world study their history and culture at school, it was largely ignored or skipped over.

The lack of education about the history of these Jewish communities allows for bigoted reactions simply largely because of a lack of knowledge and awareness.

Many still refer to Sephardi Jews as somehow “backward,” “superstitious”, “oriental” or “medieval”, as we heard from a well-known radio film critic recently, which is simply bizarre when one understands that, to give but one example, during the last century some of the worldliest, educated, successful and cosmopolitan Jews in the world could be found in places like Cairo and Baghdad.

Others will simply refer to Jewish history, culture and tradition through an entirely Ashkenazi lens.
I can’t count the amount of times I have heard people refer to the “usual” prayer book, the “normal” way of doing things or “traditional” Jewish culture when referencing Ashkenazi custom and tradition.

For those who think this is an exaggeration, try a little thought experiment. When you think of Jewish music, food or language, do you think of anything other than klezmer, gefilte fish, or bagel and lox, and Yiddish, or similar examples?

Do you know any Judeo-Spanish romansas, ever tried Kubbeh matfuniya or heard Judeo-Berber?
This has an effect of creating an “otherness” in respect to these communities, which creates the impression that they are somehow outside the normative social identity of the state and society.
There is no one Jewish way in anything, not history, culture or tradition.

There are a myriad of histories, a kaleidoscope of cultures and cacophony of traditions which makes the Jewish People a beautiful mosaic, each with its roots in our ancestral homeland but with different experiences during the millennia Diaspora.

The State of Israel has always had a tension between two models of identity politics, that of ‘melting pot’ and multiculturalism.

While many of the founding fathers and mothers understandably sought to create a ‘New Jew’ and new society for the reestablishment of sovereignty in our national homeland, it largely meant that it was constructed along Central and Eastern European lines that they had experience of and attempted to emulate.

Israelis Jews were expected to melt away their cultural prism into a largely Central and Eastern European pot.

Unfortunately, this meant that the history and culture of the Jews from other parts of the world were deemed superfluous and even damaging to this national ethos.

Nevertheless, in recent generations there has been a greater move towards multiculturalism, where multiple cultural traditions have gained slightly more prominence, if still not equality.
I firmly believe that the roots of gaining this sought after equality is awareness, knowledge and education.

In 2013, it was released that a new set of four Jewish poets were slated to be placed on Israeli banknotes. Immediately, there was a backlash when all four, Shaul Tchernichovsky, Rachel, Leah Goldberg and Natan Alterman, were Ashkanazi and none were to be Sephardi.

Prime Minister Netanyahu, who only recently discovered that he, like a large number of Ashkenazi Jews, has Sephardi heritage, claimed that the next series will feauture Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi.
All of the four Ashkenazi poets were from the Twentieth Century, yet the Prime Minister of the State of Israel could only come up with a singular Sephardi poet from the Twelfth Century. This episode aptly demonstrates the desperate need for education.

So the committee’s recommendations should be lauded and implemented as soon as possible.
In fact, the committee mentions in its recommendations the issue of the descendants of Sephardi communities who were forcibly disconnected from the Jewish People, the Anousim, and that there should be greater awareness and education of their presence.

Our education system, in Israel and the Diaspora, should be widened to include the millions of our Sephardi brothers and sisters who were forcibly disconnected from us over the centuries and are seeking a reconnection to the Jewish world. Our education system should be preparing the formal Jewish world for the immense and necessary challenge of reconnecting our people.

Moreover, the more we learn about our history and shared ties and culture with the Hispanic world, the more the Hispanic world, whether in the Iberian Peninsular, Latin or North America, will understand their Jewish roots.

This can have a profound and positive effect on bringing our communities closer across the globe.
The Sephardi and Mizrahi world is a massively diverse and multi-faceted arena,

and it should be opened up and taught thoroughly to our students and given an equal footing in society.

This committee is an important first step, but there is a lot more work to be done, but the initiators and committee members should be applauded for giving voice to and supporting the rectification of this historical injustice.