# Did You Hear the One about the Sephardic Boy Who Walks into This Orthodox Yeshiva?

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When I graduated Rambam Torah Institute, a Los Angeles Orthodox High School, in 1978 (Rambam closed in 1979, giving way to the opening of YULA and the Simon Wiesenthal Center), I was about to enter UCLA with a schizophrenic approach to my own Jewish identity. On the one hand, I had grown up in the Sephardic-Ladino community where I was about the only one to receive a formal Jewish education from middle school on. Being "shomer shabbat" was very old-country and unheard of in "Rodesli-L.A." (the community of Jews descended from the Island of Rhodes who established the Sephardic Hebrew Center in L.A., where we were members). The only ones who admired or understood why I chose a more traditional path for myself were the senior citizens born in Rhodes, toward whom I tended to gravitate.

Being an only child to a mother who was an only child, and having lost my father when I was a baby, my "playdates" typically were in the living rooms of elderly Rodesli immigrants, who told stories and jokes in Ladino, entertained with dulce (homemade preserves) served in beautiful silver bowls with silver spoons along with coffee, biskochos (round sesame or cinnamon covered cookies), and assortments of burekas or pastelikos (savory turnovers), reshas (homemade

pretzels), hard cheese, olives, and abidahu (dried, wax-covered fish roe that was a delicacy), or salado (salted, cured mackerel or tuna). There were no chicken nuggets or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches at these afternoon gatherings! These visits often took place on Shabbat afternoons; most of the community lived either on the same block or within a few minutes' walk or drive of each other. This was South Central L.A.—or Leimert Park or the Crenshaw District—where I could go trick or treating on Halloween night and ask for burekas instead of candy, and get them!

Today this neighborhood is mostly African American with not a Jew in sight for miles. The synagogues have long been sold and converted to churches, still displaying the original stained glass Stars of David in the windows. The lifestyle has also disappeared; no one lives near each other anymore in "Rodesli-L.A.," and the community has dissipated and spread to the four corners of the Greater Los Angeles Basin. Most of those special people from my "playdates" have gone to the next world, and their children or grandchildren may have remembered a few words in Ladino, have kept a few of their mother's or grandmother's recipes, and have for the most part sadly strayed from what was once a tight-knit and traditional community.

In Rhodes, it was the norm to keep the laws of kashruth, observe Shabbat and holidays, and keep close to our Jewish traditions. The members of the community didn't, however, identify as "Orthodox" Jews, nor did other Sephardic communities in the Mediterranean Basin or the Middle East identify as such. Some families were known to be more religious and knowledgeable, others much less. All, however, went to the same synagogue and followed basically the same customs and practices. This lifestyle was reproduced to an extent in America, when these immigrants established their community in Los Angeles. But the forces of assimilation and acculturation meant English first, American culture first, and work first, even on Shabbat.

The traditions of the "old country" began to fade with the next generation, especially given the choices that America offered, including meat and chicken that looked much cleaner and cheaper than the products from the kosher butcher. That's why it was unusual for me to wind up in a Jewish Orthodox school, eventually keeping kasher and observing Shabbat. And it wasn't because my mother was predisposed to that direction. My maternal grandfather was born in Bulgaria, and in the late 1800s emigrated to Palestine, where he was religiously educated and spoke many languages, including Hebrew and Arabic, before coming to the United States in 1920. He met my Rhodes-born grandmother in

Seattle, the motherland of Ladino immigrants on the West Coast. My grandmother kept kasher, as did most of her contemporaries. When she was hospitalized, our community rabbi, Solomon Mizrahi, who was revered by all, went to visit and admonish her that she could not refrain from eating in the hospital because the food was not kasher, insisting that her health came first.

But the immigrant generation did not instill a religious lifestyle in the new generation of Americans. There was too much at stake in “making it in America” to have religion hold them back. No, the reason I landed in an Orthodox Day School in the seventh grade in 1972 was that my working single mother who had put me in private grammar school through the sixth grade could not have me to go to a public school that would dismiss the students at 3:00 P.M.—when she didn’t get home until after 5:00. And in the L.A. public schools of the 1970s, there were stories of knifings in the bathrooms and tough characters to deal with. Remember, I just grew up hanging around a group of sweet old ladies and had no training in self-defense against the ruffians roaming the halls of John Burrows Jr. High or L.A. High. “Leshos!” (Keep it far away!), as we would say. Hence, my introduction to the Orthodox Day School system was more for my protection than my religious education, and it developed into my personal road back to my religious roots.

So I did not grow up in an Orthodox family. Such a word was never even familiar to Sephardim. They could be kasher, pray regularly, adhere to all the holiday rituals, and not know what “Orthodox” meant, or if they did, it didn’t refer to them. I grew up in a “traditional” Los Angeles Sephardic family—what we considered traditional in the 1960s and 1970s, that is. (I add Los Angeles because the community was less observant than those Ladino communities in Seattle, New York, even Atlanta). The difference was that while we did have our large extended family Shabbat and holiday dinners, always with one or two “old-timers” who knew how to lead the Kiddush or the Rosh haShana “Yehi Ratsones” (in Hebrew and Ladino) or the Passover “Haggada” (in Hebrew and Ladino), I still enjoyed my pizza with pepperoni just as much as I loved my burekas. We still went to homes for a very different kind of American dinner on Christmas or Easter or Thanksgiving.

That doesn’t mean we would think of missing out on celebrating Jewish holidays with all the prayers, whether Rosh haShana, Yom Kippur, or Simhat Torah with the honored “hattanim”—and our services would surely be considered “Orthodox” by any observer familiar with the various Ashkenazic Jewish movements. English translations eventually crept into the services, but the prayer books never

changed, nor did the patterns of traditional Sephardic services.

When I had my first Orthodox exposure entering Hillel Hebrew Academy in seventh grade, I came home yelling and complaining that I had to wear a kippah all day and pray so often and at a speed I could not keep up with. My mother thought I wouldn't last a week. I had to "fake" pray that first year since I couldn't possibly make it through the entire Amida with my limited Hebrew knowledge. My prior formal Jewish education consisted of Talmud Torah afternoon school (at an Ashkenazic synagogue because our Sephardic synagogue was too far and offered little in terms of Jewish education). I made (Orthodox) friends, and soon I was tolerating this "super Jewish" environment I had been thrown into.

When I started being invited to bar mitzvas almost weekly and didn't want my friends to know that I drove on Shabbat, I would have my mother drive me up nearby alleys, crouching under the glove compartment so that no one would see me in a car, and when the coast was clear, I'd jump out and walk the last block to the Orthodox Synagogue, Beth Jacob, in Beverly Hills where all the bar mitzvas of my classmates took place. This was a regular paranoid ritual that I practiced, for I feared what my friends or rabbis would think if they only knew! In time, I learned to appreciate the Jewish education I was receiving and the Orthodox Jewish lifestyle of my friends to the point where I soon started my own journey toward what would be considered an Orthodox lifestyle.

I started by giving up pork products around the age of 14. After controlling my taste buds in that category (though my mom thought there was definitely something emotionally wrong with me to give up something I loved so much!), I moved on to eliminate shellfish, then milk and meat, and so forth. It was a gradual process of several years until I eventually stopped driving on Shabbat and holidays and took up the Orthodox lifestyle being taught in my school. I figured that this was the way my grandparents or great-grandparents lived their Judaism, and I could reconnect that chain of tradition, which likely went back generations from what I learned about Sephardic history. I continued my communal connection to my Rodesli synagogue, the Sephardic Hebrew Center, where I became the youngest board member and was part of the small youth group established. I learned to take part in the religious services as a "junior hazzan" on Shabbat and High Holidays.

In my high school, though, I was one of maybe two or three Sephardic students (none of whom came from a Ladino-Sephardic background), and I was the only one with a strong Sephardic identity, having become active in the local Sephardic youth groups that also participated in the national American Sephardic Federation

youth conventions of the 1970s. (In 1977, when I was in the twelfth grade, and my Talmud teacher, whom I really liked, made one of his typical anti-Sephardic remarks in class like “Sephardim remind me of Arabs,” that was the last straw. I stormed out of my class, slamming the door behind me, and marched to the school office with the rabbi running behind me promising he was “just joking.” I called the director of the American Sephardi Federation in New York (a “toll call” no less), whom I had met recently on an ASF youth convention and asked if he could come on his next visit to L.A. and speak to my school about Sephardic history and contribution to Judaism. He gladly agreed. I informed my principal in a stern tone that there would be an assembly for the entire school and “every rabbi and student better be there!” They indeed all attended a very interesting lecture, and I was transformed into the Sephardic poster child for the school.)

As I went through four years of Orthodox Yeshiva High School, I was developing two distinct personas, one the Orthodox student who was a member of the Bnei Akiva youth movement, a counselor at the summer and winter Bnei Akiva camps, and the founder of the first chapter of Bnei Akiva at a Sephardic grade school in L.A.; the other a “non-kippah wearing” member of the Sephardic community. By the time I graduated high school and went to UCLA, where I knew both friends from my Sephardic community as well as from my Yeshiva High School, I didn’t know whether to wear a kippah or not and was ashamed and conflicted either way. I ended up wearing a cap for my entire freshman year! I was worried about what my Orthodox friends would think of me if they saw me sans kippah and what kind of fanatic my Sephardic friends would think I’d become if they saw me with one.

This is where I started to appreciate the difference between an Orthodox approach to Judaism and a Sephardic approach to Judaism. I started to attend Magen David Congregation, the Syrian synagogue in L.A. (since I could no longer drive to the Sephardic Hebrew Center with its mixed seating and a microphone, which I now felt uncomfortable with). The walk to Magen David was 45 minutes, but I did it weekly. I started to make friends who were typical of the Syrian Sephardic communities: Shabbat- and kashruth-observant, but not kippah-wearing and not hung up on the “Orthodox look.” They blended into the non-Jewish world just fine, but still kept a very strong Jewish identity. They may have kept strictly kasher at home but felt comfortable eating in non-kasher restaurants, just keeping away from the meat and shellfish. To some, they wouldn’t be considered Orthodox at all; to others they would be considered very Orthodox, based on their regular synagogue attendance, men praying every morning with their tefillin and not driving on Shabbat. And mixed

dancing?something that was taboo in those days at any Orthodox event, whether for young or old was never an issue! That was my “aha” moment; the point where I had the realization that Sephardim did not easily fit into a category of Orthodox, Conservative, or Reform. We were all over the place, and everyone was fine with it.

As I became more observant, my Sephardic community embraced me as “hahamiko,” a young learned person. I wasn’t denigrated as a religious fanatic, nor was I looked down upon for not wearing a kippah all the time or not fitting the “Orthodox” compartment perfectly. My Sephardic community didn’t judge me; I think they admired me or at least that is how I felt, even though they didn’t always understand why I could no longer attend services at the synagogue I grew up in. I was able to break away from the stigma of fitting the look and practice of Orthodox Judaism, even though I admired and related to their level of observance. While I tried to parlay my activism in the Orthodox Bnei Akiva youth movement, which I still admire to this day, I realized that Sephardic kids, as different as they were in their religious backgrounds, just couldn’t be form-fitted to an Orthodox Jewish youth movement where every boy was expected to wear a kippah, every girl a skirt, act a certain way, dress a certain way, pray three times a day plus birkat haMazon (grace after meals), refrain from attending mixed dances, and basically fit the mold.

But Sephardim didn’t fit such a mold. We were all unique and different to certain extents, even though we generally felt comfortable praying under the same roof. And no one judged us; no one looked at us funny for wearing or not wearing a kippah in the street; women could be very religious and still wear pants or what the Orthodox would call “immodest” clothing; no one felt uncomfortable whether we ate strictly kasher or “pseudo” kasher; no one really minded if you got to synagogue by foot or by car, as long as you got there. And if you didn’t go to synagogue regularly, that was also fine. Shabbat dinner was still to be shared with the family, and major Jewish holidays were spent in synagogue from start to finish, if you could make it.

This Sephardic Jewish identity really created a wider tent for all of us to fit under, and it felt good to be together and not critical of others who observed more or less than we did. The summer of 1980 found me half way through my UCLA career and I decided to join my Orthodox friends from high school who made study in Israel either after high school or during college a commonplace rite of passage. I signed up too and ended up in Jerusalem at Hebrew University with a group of friends, where we immediately gravitated to the other Yeshiva high

school grads from across the United States who were also on their Junior year abroad program, coordinating Shabbat dinners together and living the “Orthodox” life in Jerusalem. I wore a kippah all the time, and it felt okay. After all, I was in Israel. The summer of 1980 also happened to be the first summer of the Sephardic Educational Center (SEC) program, founded by Dr. Jose Nessim (z”l) from L.A., who had told me before I left to make sure and visit the program once I got to Jerusalem. I did, and it was life-altering—not because of the experience to be with Sephardic young adults my age from five different countries, but to see rabbis leading the program who were what we would consider “Orthodox,” yet not forcing anyone to wear a kippah or dress in a certain way, other than out of respect for holy places visited or during meals or prayers or classes.

Rabbis Moshe Shamah and Sam Kassin of the Syrian Sephardic community of Brooklyn, and Rabbi Benito Garzon of Spain, forever changed my attitude toward religious life, opened my eyes to Sephardic halakha, and the “live and let live” approach that made all feel comfortable while studying and believing in the same approach to Judaism, just at every individual’s own pace.

In the past 35 years, my Jewish identity has been shaped more by my involvement with the SEC than my Orthodox high school education, with exposure to those Sephardic rabbis and others I met subsequently who with moderation and tolerance kept alive the spirit of the Classical Sephardic approach to Judaism and opened my eyes to a non-denominational approach that echoed the lives of my ancestors who lived in places like Rhodes or Bulgaria and back to the Iberian Peninsula. Theirs was a Judaism that was a natural part of their everyday lives, with one basic approach that centered on a fervent belief in God, traditions that were celebrated by all, synagogues where the entire community worshiped without “membership ID’s” that distinguished what kind of Jew you were.

There were some weak links in the chain of tradition as Sephardic Jews relocated from the Old World to the new but there is certainly hope for a renaissance in Sephardic life as many find that this classic approach to Jewish life is far more comfortable and meaningful that what is offered by choosing an identity that just doesn’t always form fit among Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Hasidic, or Hareidi approaches to Judaism. At our annual SEC Shavuot Retreat for young families in Palm Desert, CA, last May, we held a town hall discussion as part of our Shavuot night study program, entitled “What's Wrong with Organized Religion, and How Can We Fix It?” It was led by another product of the Orthodox educational system, Rabbi Daniel Bouskila, who has also come to embrace and symbolize the Classical Sephardic approach to Judaism. The young families

present attend Sephardic synagogues across the L.A. community, synagogues that would appear “Orthodox” but for the fact that not all attendees walk to synagogue, and not all keep strictly kasher, and not all wear kippot outside the synagogue—but all feel a common cause and belief in God and the Torah, along with the centrality of the State of Israel. Suggestions ranged from how to balance the old traditions with the needs of the younger generation and how to attract and hold the attention of synagogue goers. Here were the young leaders who have or will occupy the positions of leadership in our Sephardic communities, and none were shy about introducing changes and suggesting approaches within our traditional halakhic approach that would ensure the survival of these synagogues and communities.

I felt proud as a Sephardic Jew to be able to discuss these issues without fear of backlash or judgment, and proud that I am not judged nor do I feel the need to judge others on their observance. We are all in the same boat and recognize that some will always be more observant and some less and our jobs as Jews are to make all feel comfortable and welcome, maintain a common set of beliefs, and not check ID’s at the door of Judaism. That is the Sephardic approach; it is the vision and identity I gained from many years of following Dr. Nessim’s philosophy: Only God can judge us. This is why I have shied away from identifying myself with the “O” word. I just don’t fit into a denominational compartment and if you feel the same way, you might want to join a Classical Sephardic community—regardless of your bloodline!

Did I mention that my father was Ashkenazic? If you ask an Orthodox Jew, I should “halakhically” follow the tradition of my father. But I don’t, not as an insult to him but as a way of life that I was raised with and came to love and connect to. I don’t find the unity, warmth, and “big tent” feel in the Orthodox world that I do in the Sephardic world. But that’s just me, and I respect and admire you if you are Orthodox or Modern Orthodox or any other Jewish identity as long as it works to bring you closer to God, Israel, and the Jewish People. That’s just the Sephardic way.

Now a look at the next generation. I have two sons and a daughter. My oldest son (20) went through middle school and high school at a Modern Orthodox school in L.A. My middle son (17), only attended Middle School there, and then went to public high school along with my daughter for a number of reasons, not the least being the high cost. I appreciated the Modern Orthodox education and great social bonds that the school offered. I also appreciated the love for Israel that the school incorporated into its curriculum. The alternative Yeshiva high schools in

our area have a more right-wing reputation, which wasn't the direction I wanted for my family. However I did not see a passion for Judaism or the practice of mitzvoth develop in my sons or their friends that I had once experienced myself. My children's religious connection still came from home, and the example we tried to create of a traditional Sephardic family, not from school, which surprised me.

The feeling I had when I went to high school was that we had a "religious contract" to keep Shabbat, kashruth, etc., even after we graduated. The students I observed in my sons' classes over the past few years didn't seem to have that commitment. University life poses challenges to keeping Shabbat and kashruth, praying every day, and taking off class for holiday observance that, for me, went without question but today seems to be a different story. While I never retreated in my religious observance, nor did most of my classmates, the graduates of today's Modern Orthodox high school, if my own sons are an example, do not seem to feel the same religious obligation we did upon graduation, and that's a problem. University and the "outside world" appear to have overtaken whatever commitment for practicing a level of Orthodox Judaism they were taught in high school.

Luckily for my children, they have their connections to the SEC, whether through trips to Israel or local holiday celebrations like our Shavuot Retreat to keep them excited about Judaism and Israel. Otherwise, they would be left empty-handed without any follow up from their high school rabbis, which is a shame. My wife and I wonder whether the financial investment in their Jewish education was worth it and if it will keep them committed as observant Jews. We took the approach more typical of Sephardic families of trying not to force them to practice their Judaism, though I try to continuously prod and plead that they pray, come to synagogue, remember kashruth when they are away from home. It is not easy, though. I often wonder if they would have been more passionate about their Judaism if we went down a more strictly Orthodox path than a moderate Sephardic one. Hopefully we did make the spiritually healthy decision in the long run.

But knowing what Jewish path is best for today and tomorrow is not necessarily what worked for my generation. There is no question that there needs to be a shakeup in the Modern Orthodox educational system to bring back the passion of Judaism, and there also needs to be more emphasis on Jewish commitment in the Sephardic world if that branch of Judaism is to be strengthened in the Diaspora. For the achievement of a moderate and observant next Jewish generation, there will need to be a synthesis of all the best qualities and approaches of these and

other Jewish like-minded approaches, from Modern Orthodox to Sephardic and beyond, creating a Jewish lifestyle that is neither extremely stringent or oppressive nor exceedingly indifferent to religious observance. I hope our religious leaders are up to the task.