An Ashkenazic Rabbi in a Sephardic/Persian Community

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Introduction

There is a naïve belief that traditional Jewish religious communities have preserved pristine models of uninfluenced integrity. The reality is that all Jewish communities have been and are influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the cultures and norms of the host countries they live in. One of the most obvious examples is the variation in culture and custom as between communities who have lived under Christianity and those under Islam.

For all that, the purely halakhic differences between Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities are minimal. No greater than between say, different Hassidic sects. The most well-known halakhic differences between the two worlds are *kitniyot* on Pesah and whether one accepts Bet Yosef rather than the Remah. But even that is no longer the case in reality.

Once it was thought (stereotypically) that superstition and simplistic Kabbalah were what distinguished the two wings of Judaism. But Orthodoxy in the Ashkenazic world has become so dominated by superstition, miracle workers, miracle rabbis, miracle spells and cures that such distinctions no longer hold true.

So why are we so fixated on the differences?

I believe it is one of the tragedies of our age that, in some circles, the Jews of Muslim societies are often regarded as somehow less authentic. This essay is an attempt to bring a different perspective from someone who has worked in both worlds.

History

My first encounter with the Sephardim was in Israel in the 1950s. Arriving as a teenager, from Britain, to study in yeshiva. The Israelis I first met when I arrived in Haifa were tense, left-wing, anti-religious Ashkenazim, bent on establishing a socialist paradise, closer to Marx than Moses.

I don’t want to dwell here on the depressing issue of Ashkenazic discrimination directed at the Sephardic communities that persists particularly in Israeli Hareidi Orthodoxy. And the last thing I want is to sound condescending or patronizing. I am wary of generalizations, even my own. But I saw the disadvantages and the discrimination that so many Sephardic immigrants experienced in their early years. Some of it admittedly, simply because of a lack of resources and planning. But it disturbed me.

Those Sephardim I met in Israel (in my day we did not call them Mizrahim, for that was the name of a Religious Party then) were in general so much warmer, softer, and caring. They did not have the animus toward religion that the Left did. They were more traditional and inclusive religiously than their Ashkenazic colleagues.

In the yeshivot I attended, students from Yemen, Iraq, and Morocco were more emotional and less arrogant than their Ashkenazic colleagues. When I went to spend a Shabbat at home with my Sephardic friends, quite apart from the food, there was a welcoming atmosphere that was unforgettable. In the Bet HaMidrash, they were every bit as learned and brilliant. Yet because they were studying in Ashkenazic yeshivot with Ashkenazic Rashei Yeshiva there was a palpable sense of being on the fringe.

I began to search for the factors that made those Sephardic Jews I met so positively different. Was it the warmer Oriental, Islamic mentality? The emphasis on hospitality in contrast to the Western Christian colder tendency to withdraw

into privacy? Was it the fact that in the Sephardic world there was no denominational divide, as we had, between Orthodox and Reform? Sephardim gathered not by denomination or degree of observance, so much as by city or country of origin. Perhaps it was a matter of historical evolution.

The Muslim world that most of the Sephardim lived in was still almost pre-industrial. Those Sephardim who had lived in Western societies such as the Spanish and Portuguese, had moved on and up. In Israel, old established and wealthy Sephardic families formed an elite. Most of the new immigrants, on the other hand, were poor in material goods and education and had been living under Islamic restrictions as second-class citizens. The Sephardic fear of returning to Muslim rule has always made them more proudly nationalist and more right-wing than left.

So why the discrimination? What was it I wondered that made Jews seemed infected with the almost universal disease of wanting to find others to whom we could feel superior? It wasn't just the Sephardim of course; the early Eastern European Zionists despised the Germans, who looked down on the Sephardim, who in turn marginalized the Ethiopians and then felt superior to the Russians. Perhaps it is the same primitive human nature that feeds prejudice the world over.

I have even wondered if my sense of kinship was a reaction against my Imperialist, Colonialist British education that led me to feel sympathy for the underdog and disadvantaged, as indeed I did at a very early age for those who suffered under Apartheid. The Ashkenazic world seemed to have no notion of the grandeur and the wealth of Sephardic culture or history. They saw the great Sephardic authorities as closet Ashkenazim. Eastern European talmudic study was regarded as superior to the Sephardic methodologies. As a result, a new generation of Sephardic rabbis and leaders in Israel began to ape the dress and mentality, sometimes even the Yiddish, of the Ashkenazic rabbinical elite.

It was when I came across Rav Ovadia Yosef's "*Yabia Omer*" that I realized that here was a different, approach, a broader vista, a more lenient and even more scholarly approach to those of the Lithuanian rabbis and followers of the Hazon Ish. Of course, I was under no illusion that there are almost always different opinions. But why was I taught only one and not the other? It was only my personal initiative that opened another world to me.

England

Years later, I was the Principal of Carmel College, the Jewish English residential school near Oxford that attracted a lot of students from outside the UK, particularly from Israel, Iran, Spain, and Gibraltar. The school cultivated a very English academic atmosphere and combined it with an officially Orthodox lifestyle. It was like a Yeshiva High School except that most pupils did not come from Orthodox families. There was certainly a dissonance between the demands of the school religiously and the way the pupils lived Jewishly at home. Parents tended to send their children there for the academics and the social Jewish atmosphere rather than the religious environment.

There, too, I detected a different dimension in the Sephardic pupils. They were much more attached to family life, respectful of parents and tradition. I sensed their need for validation for their Sephardic Judaism in an atmosphere where all the Jewish teachers were Ashkenazic. Years later, I heard New York Sephardim who had gone to elite Ashkenazic schools complain that they were made to feel inferior and that their traditions and rabbis were not as valid as those of the Ashkenazim. And I have noticed over the years how those of my former pupils who have become much more religious after they left the school, regardless of how uninterested they seemed to be in school, were almost all Sephardic. They seemed to have a more spiritual gene!

Yet at Carmel I encountered some parental resistance to these pupils on the spurious grounds that they would lower the academic and social standards. I reacted furiously. I was already sensitized by my experiences in Israel. And I assured anyone who asked that the Sephardic pupils raised the social and academic level of the school. This snobbery offended me to my core. All the more so, since I was brought up in a home where my parents went out of their way to excoriate any kind of racism or discrimination. Once one is inured to such feelings toward outsiders, it inevitably metastasizes into hatred of one’s own.

After the Shah of Persia fell in 1997, Chabad brought almost a thousand Iranian children to Britain, where they awaited American visas. Chabad in London had a humanitarian crisis on its hands. It is one thing to find temporary homes for a handful, quite another to do so for hundreds. Our school, with its huge campus, was able to put up hundreds of Iranian youngsters for months, and we tried our best to teach and integrate them until they were able to rejoin their families. Here, too, I had to field complaints and agitation from non-Jewish teachers as well

as parents against “flooding the school with foreigners.” In the end, the process took over, and it went smoothly for everyone. Once again, the attitudes of the Iranian children were impressive on almost every level. They bore the uncertainty and pain of separation with dignity and equanimity. It was a salutary experience for everyone involved. It endeared them even more to me.

Manhattan

Many years later, I retired to New York, where I had no intention of getting involved in the rabbinate. Although most Iranian Jews on the East Coast had gravitated toward Brooklyn or Great Neck, several families of my former pupils from Iran were now living in Manhattan. They had gotten together with other Iranians to establish a small religious community that met only on Shabbat mornings and Festivals. After moving from place to place, they had finally rented space in Park East synagogue on East 68th Street. They had employed a rabbi from Iran who had served them well for many years but had now retired; and they were looking for a replacement.

My pupils remembered my authoritarian streak and liked my English oratory as well as my open and tolerant approach. They approached me about taking on the assignment. I told them I was not interested in taking on a rabbinic position. But they assured me this was no full-time position, and the community was more like a boutique than a full-service congregation. It was not formally constituted: no board or membership fees; just an informal collection of Iranian Jews; some wealthy, some not. Naturally it is the voluntary contributions of those who can afford it that keep the community alive.

Initially there was some resistance from those who did not know me, to the appointment of an English Ashkenazi, even if several Sephardic communities in New York over the years have had Ashkenazic rabbis. They were anxious to preserve their Persian customs and traditions and feared I might try to Anglicize them. They were worried that my more liberal outlook on life might come into conflict with their more authoritarian mentality. We finally came to an informal understanding that has now lasted for almost 10 years.

There is mutual respect despite our differences. Above all, I have come to enjoy a warmer, more informal relationship than those I experienced in European Ashkenazic communities. And I can indulge my semi-retirement without feeling

completely guilty about giving up rabbinical work altogether.

Customs

But what are differences? I found the transition from Ashkenazic customs to Sephardic ones to be unproblematic. The variations in traditional texts and *Nushaot* are really minor. I was brought up on the *Havarah Sephardit,* the Sephardic Israeli pronunciation. Besides, even within Sephardic communities, there are differences in the way Hebrew is vocalized between different cities and countries. There are some juxtapositions and additions of *Tehilim* and different *Piyutim*. But the core of every service, the Amidah, the *Birkhot Keriat Shema,* and of course *Keriat HaTorah* remain the same. The Priestly Blessings are not confined exclusively to Festivals.

What is most obvious is the sound, the music, which is predominantly oriental. If once it was rare to hear oriental music in Western societies, now it is a much more common and familiar choice. Even so, Yemenite and Syrian sounds are different; the influence of Israeli music has spread across almost all communities; and at least half of our Persian music now includes such favorites as *Yerushalim Shel Zahav*, *Eytz HaRimon*, *Al Kol Eleh,* as well as *Ta'am HaMan* and other popular ethnic songs. Israeli religious singers span the differences, and there is much cross-cultural influence. Our Hazzan, proudly Yemenite, integrates Persian folk songs into the service.

In our Persian services, there is a marked informality and rowdy enthusiasm, ululations of celebration. Women make much more of the Torah, passing additional decorations of the Torah around, holding hands up to kiss, pressing them to their eyes. Men kiss the *Parohet* and gather round the Reader's desk for *Birkhot HaHodesh*. After the services, men and women approach the curtains to pray for some personal reason. Otherwise services are similar. I am too often forced to intervene to stop the chatting and redirect the congregation to the service at hand. But that was equally true of my Ashkenazic communities.

Although Persians like to be well-dressed and elegant, informality of dress is accepted. Head covering for women is what differentiates the more Orthodox from the less. Wigs are more of a rarity in Sephardic communities than in Ashkenazic ones. Very few of the women in our community are comfortable with Hebrew or the services. We try our best to help them navigate. We naturally

retain a *mehitza,* but it splits the small sanctuary down the middle into equal sections.

In many Sephardic communities, congregants who are not themselves Orthodox show above-average knowledge and expertise in *Tefilla* and *Keriat HaTorah.* This is less true of many Persian communities. Few of them are Orthodox in the strict sense of the word, but they are proud of their Persian Jewish identities and traditions. There remains a reluctance to identify with Conservative of Reform Judaism. This is of course much truer in Israel than in the United States. But for most Sephardic communities, those who are observant sit and mix with those who are not at all and a range in the middle.

I have succeeded with a few cross-cultural innovations. Services are shorter than the norm. Those who want to say more can do so at the start or the end. We leave out certain optional prayers. I interject in English to give page numbers and during *Keriat HaTorah*, between sections, to explain where we are and what we are reading. Sometimes when a service goes on for too long we omit the full repetition of the Amidah.

Family life is very strong. Traditional values of hospitality mean that Friday evenings and festivals are celebrated more as social events than as religious ones. Weddings are much more rowdy and enthusiastic and less restrained. And although mourning rituals are similar, there are more public memorials that start with the end of the *Shiva*. At funerals, spices and perfumed water are passed around. Whereas memorials for the dead are usually confined to the anniversary and *Yizkor* days in Ashkenazic synagogues, many Persians like to have a *Hashkaba* whenever they are called to the Torah. And diets, foods, and *Kiddushim* reflect Persian tastes rather than Ashkenazic ones. But to reiterate, the differences are minor, and are of style, rather than content.

Culture Clash

Persian Jewry, as the only community of Jews living under the Shiites, probably suffered more than any other Sephardic community. It was unable to sustain the range of intensive Jewish institutions that many other communities in the Muslim world could. The arrival of the Alliance Israelite Universelle over 100 years ago brought secular education to Iran’s Jews, and with it a weakening of rabbinic, religious authority. Under assault from Shiite clerics, Jews had been subject to

constant pressure, humiliation, and forced conversions. Only under the Pahlavis had things improved significantly. But even so many Jews converted to Islam or to the Baha'i faith to try to escape their inferior position as Jews. Secularism had already made massive inroads, and this is reflected today in the United States, where many Iranians have left the Jewish fold. Almost all the Persians of my community have arrived during the past 50 years, some having come via Israel. And in some families the ties with Judaism were already weak in Persia. In fact, some of my community were and still are more attached to their Iranian heritage than they are to their Jewish heritage.

As in all immigrant communities, there are cultural dislocations and conflicts to be resolved. In the process of acculturation, tensions often erupt between observant and less observant members of the same family. Back home, the role of women was different. Men ruled the roost. Sons and daughters obeyed their parents—very different from the mores of a predominantly secular United States. They are challenged by the issues of how to balance loyalty to tradition with the demands of modernity. Does one retreat behind the security of ghetto walls, with a close support structure? Or does one venture forth into the secular world, with all its risks, and leave tradition behind? And there are all the gradations and varieties of any human society. Some still cling to the idea that one should remain strictly within one's own ethnic community. Different towns and cities in Iran varied in degree of Orthodoxy and loyalty. Some are still reluctant to intermarry with Iranians who came from different communities back home. There is still a difference between those who came from urban communities as opposed to rural ones.

As with all immigrant groups, there are feelings of insecurity that drive them toward economic success and stability. Persians more than most communities are split between those who see education and academic and professional success as the route to security, and those who think only in terms of making money. In both areas, they have been very successful.

Like most religious communities, they are increasingly being pulled in different directions. One section is assimilating and marrying out. The other is abandoning Sephardic moderation for Hareidi attitudes. Simultaneously, one sector is moving toward rationalism and the other retreating into primitive superstition and credulity. Some are shedding their commitment to Judaism and Israel, and others are intensifying it without any moderation or criticism. Some are anxious to ensure that their children get a good Jewish education. Others prefer to send their children to non-Jewish schools, even with work and activities on Shabbat and

Festivals. Some come to synagogue every Shabbat; others come only festivals (and then one day only), and still others only on High Holy Days.

Parents bring their young children to synagogue on Shabbat. But as soon as they become teenagers, the children no longer come regularly. Once the younger generation begin to study and then work, they come only for occasional social interaction. They throw themselves into the social singles whirl of Manhattan. They marry much later than they used to. But when they do, and have children of their own, that is when they begin to return. So, a community like mine sees very few millennials except for festive and social occasions, and goes through a demographic hiatus that denudes it of active young men and women until a later stage in life and circumstances. Yet for all that, there is a most definite sense of Persian and Sephardic identity and pride. Even if some are prepared to relinquish it (which actually includes some who went to Orthodox Jewish Day Schools but have now abandoned religious practice) just as many actively want to continue their specific Iranian heritage, customs, and have a much more tolerant and open-minded approach to difference and variation in degree of practice.

Almost all the members of the community are fiercely proud, positive and protective of Israel. Their views are strongly to the right. Having lived under the influence of the Mullahs, they are under no illusion as to how much better off they are in a free and open society. Together with their Persian heritage, they remain very much more in sync with Orthodox attitudes in the United States than with the more acculturated.

Although presiding over the services is the obvious role of a rabbi, one cannot be involved with a group of people without moving beyond the synagogue into their happy and sad occasions and the challenges of home and work and society that add an informal, pastoral dimension to community life. And this has inevitably brought me into contact with other Iranian communities of different dimensions and origins in Great Neck and Brooklyn, not to mention Los Angeles. The challenges everywhere are similar.

There is a degree of interconnection and intermarriage with other Sephardic communities, notably the longer established, larger, stronger, and some ways more successful Syrian communities. But even they face similar challenges. We have also attracted some Sephardim from Morocco, Egypt, and Iraq, who appreciate my more cerebral and cross-cultural sermons. But we remain small and personal. Perhaps this and the informality is precisely why I enjoy it so much! Everything I have learnt from my community has only confirmed my previous impressions of the strengths and weaknesses of Persian Jewry.

Prediction and Conclusion

The picture and the prognostications are good in parts. But it is clear, that as with American Jewry in general, only those families that stress and emphasize Jewish identity in practice as well as theory are the ones that will survive as Jews. I am often asked why we do not make life easier by lessening ritual demands. And my reply has always been that I very much doubt that would bring anyone closer to religious practice. The lower the expectation, the lower the bar, and the less the achievement. There is a difference between tolerating those who are unable or unwilling to do something, a feature of Sephardic congregations, and removing the idea and requirement of traditional halakha altogether. At least the ideal and tradition are retained de jure if not de facto.

As I listen to the opinions of my younger congregants, I am often worried and upset by the challenges. Many have gone away from home to study, and this has often weakened their ties to family traditions. Some seek partners outside the Jewish community. Others become even more appreciative of what home has to offer. Although in principle, I approve of genuine conversion out of religious conviction, my years of experience in the practical rabbinate have convinced me that those converts who end up living a committed life are very few. And there is a huge difference between someone converting out of conviction rather than for marriage. The attraction of less discipline and another part of the family seeming freer take their toll on the next generation. And that is why, although I would rather like to encourage rather than reject, I am ambivalent and disturbed by the rise in intermarriage I am encountering. At the same time, I often come across those who have drifted, coming back into the fold.

We have always gone for quality over quantity and *Shear Yashuv*, a remnant returns. I am optimistic about Sephardic Judaism precisely because most have still retained their more open inclusive approach to the way Jews dress, practice, and participate religiously. Religion in the west is more cerebral and theological. Islam shares with Judaism the emphasis on a way of life rather than a series of mental propositions supported by a thin veneer of ritual. The Sephardic approach to religion is more emotional, more mystical.

I believe the Sephardic world with its tolerance, inclusivity, and emphasis on the emotional, offers an important counter-narrative and paradigm for Jewish life in

our times. It is better placed to deal with cynicism. It can help us get the most out of the scientific, secular society we live in, rather than fight against it.