Ashkenazim and Sephardim—United in Education

View PDF



Rabbi Ariel Cohen received rabbinic ordination from Yeshivat Ohr Hachaim. He is a fellow of the YU-Teach cohort and is currently pursuing a Masters in Educational Leadership. He teaches Judaic Studies at Manhattan Day School, where he serves as Director of Sephardic Studies. This article appears in issue 29 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

As a young boy growing up in Queens, NY, I always knew that my family's traditions were slightly different from those of my classmates. Halakhot and practices taught in school, generally speaking, reflected what I experienced at home, but very often my customs were different. You see, my father was born in Afghanistan and my mother in Morocco, and as such, I was raised following Sephardic/Middle Eastern customs. Our fundamental ideologies and overall spiritual goals were the same as that of my Ashkenazic classmates, but our religious experience manifested itself in a different way.

There were some observable differences, like the songs we sang during *tefilla* as well as during various holidays and celebrations. We had certain festive clothes that were unique and colorful. And of course, probably the most notable difference, our cuisine was quite distinctive.

There were also some more subtle cultural differences. An overall stress was placed on warmth in the home, specifically when guests were present (*hakhnasat orehim)*. The utmost respect was shown to authoritative figures, including family members (parents, grandparents, etc.) and *rabbanim*. And finally, there were differences in our performance of certain halakhot. Very often it seemed that my customs in mitzvah observance followed a more lenient path, while my Ashkenazic counterparts held a stricter inclination.

These differences never bothered me. We took tremendous pride in our Sephardic identity, and I felt comfortable in my Sephardic skin. What I found challenging and troubling however, was when my presumptions about mitzvah performance were questioned by some of my teachers or when details surrounding a mitzvah or halakha were questioned or worse, disregarded. If a Sephardic practice was a more famous one (e.g. *kitniyot* and rice on Pessah), it may have been noted, but it was often marginalized.

The education I received during my youth was very comprehensive. I went to a co-ed, Modern Orthodox elementary school whose students were predominantly Ashkenazim. This school was a typical Modern Orthodox school, with a warm environment that stressed Torah values. It was a school that had strong Judaic and General studies programs. And of course, it instilled an appreciation for the Hebrew language and the land of Israel.

During my elementary school years, it is fair to say that I was confused regarding whether my family was practicing the halakhot correctly. I would learn one thing in school, and perform something slightly different at home. When friends from an Ashkenazi background would visit my synagogue on Shabbat, they were lost and felt no connection to the *tefillot*. They would often tease me about the way we chanted our prayers. They were kids, and kids often enjoy ridiculing; but their jeering echoed the sentiment I often felt in school. My familial customs, specifically our manner in approaching *tefilla* and mitzvah observance was strange at best, and maybe even wrong.

There are a few stories that stand out from my childhood that made me feel self-conscious and embarrassed about my Sephardic customs. In the 6th grade, I was sitting at the end of *pesukei d'zimra*. My *rebbe* kindly asked me to stand for *Az yashir* and for *Yishtabah,* and I respectfully obliged. He was (and still is) a very kind man, and I figured that I would stand up this time to respect his position, but explain to him after *tefilla* that the Sephardic custom is to sit for these *tefillot*.

After *tefilla* ended, I approached my *rebbe* and told him that in my synagogue we have a different custom, as we all sit for *Az yashir* and *Yishtabah*. I expected him to apologize or at least retract his position but instead he said, "There is no such custom." I remember his words very clearly because it was a very upsetting experience for me. I could understand if he had told me to conform to the custom of standing practiced in our school. Instead I felt that my custom was delegitimized by an important figure in my life.

Another difficult moment occurred in the 8th grade. We had an end-of-year exam that required us to say the three paragraphs of *Shema* by heart with the correct pronunciation. This I knew would be easy for me, as I often said *Shema* in my synagogue as one of the *Hazzanim*. As I began reciting *Shema* to my 8th grade *Rebbe*, I noticed that after every couple of words, he was correcting me under his breath. When I got to the third verse and said "*V'hayu Hadevarim Ha'eleh,*" he corrected me aloud and said "*Eyleh*!" I repeated the word "*Eleh*" and again he corrected me by saying "*Eyleh*!" Apparently I was mispronouncing a word that I thought I knew. I finally acquiesced and said "*Eyleh,*" but was caught again when I said *Anokhi* instead of *Ohnokhi*. As you can imagine, I did not do very well on this test.

What troubled me about these two instances was not the personal affront. By not validating my custom, I felt that these teachers were dismissing my family's heritage, and in my mind they were belittling my father and all of his ancestors. They did not display awareness of a particular custom, and as such it was deemed incorrect and invalid. I don't think that they were insensitive people; on the contrary, they were very conscious and caring individuals. However, because of their lack of awareness of differing customs, their actions came off as callous and insulting.

We Jewish educators must teach and model the importance of diversity and inclusion in religious observance. Our sages teach us that "Just as their faces are different, so too are their thoughts different" (*Berakhot* 58a). I believe this concept can be applied when teaching students from different backgrounds. We must be very sensitive to their customs, traditions, and mannerisms, and try to better understand them. This applies equally to Sephardic and Ashkenazic customs, as well as to the various differences found in intra-Sephardic and intra-Ashkenazic communities.

Many challenges face us when dealing with children of differing familial customs. We may not be knowledgeable about the numerous differences found in so many details of halakha. Additionally, there are misconceptions about certain customs that are better known. For example, many know that Sephardim eat *kitniyot* on Pesah, but it is surprising to see the differing customs among Sephardim regarding which *kitniyot* are permitted and which are not permitted.

Another more subtle challenge stems from the natural sense of pride we all feel toward our personal customs. We have been performing mitzvot in a certain way in our family, and it is hard to see things in a different light. Some effort is required when attempting to value and appreciate the differing practices of

others.

Of course the bigger the challenge, the bigger the opportunity. Imbuing our students with an understanding that we are one nation with many unique ways to connect and observe halakha*;* this vital insight will help them as observant Jews and as respectful individuals.

Let me share some suggestions that may help promote a more inclusive and all-embracing environment when teaching children who come from different backgrounds. The advice can be utilized by teachers of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic origin, as well as by laypeople in their daily interactions with fellow Jews.

1. Sensitivity and understanding. When you come across a custom or practice that seems strange or odd, don't be so quick to dismiss it. Inquiring is okay, and even questioning it in a respectful way is fine, but do not be disparaging. Never discredit a practice without proper examination of the custom. As the sages of the Great Assembly taught "*Hevu Metunim b'din,*" be patient when you judge (*Avot* 1:1). Try first to understand the custom, and then begin to advise accordingly.

I was recently told a story about a young woman who made the *berakha* of "*al netilat yadayim*" before she washed her hands for bread. Her advisors told her that she was acting improperly, as we are supposed to make the blessing after we wash our hands. Little did they know that she was a descendant of the great Yemenite Rabbi, Rav Kapach, who followed the opinion of the Rambam regarding this halakha. The Rambam states that one should make the *berakha* of "*al netilat yadayim*" before one washes hands before eating bread (*Hilkhot Berakhot* 6:2; see also *Bet Yosef* 158).

2. Never stop learning. When learning halakha*,* try to internalize the opinion of the *Shulhan Arukh* and the *Rama* (or any other dissenting opinions). It is quite acceptable for people to simply focus on the practical halakha that applies to their specific situation. As teachers, however, we must try to identify and be conscious of the different views that are quoted in halakha. Often, as I learn the *Shulhan Arukh* and *Rama*, I will try to visualize a Sephardic person and an Ashkenazic person practicing the distinct halakhot, in the hope of creating a lasting mental image.

3. Unity is strength. When teaching about differing customs and traditions, it is critical to reiterate that we are one nation and have one destiny. The Jewish nation has a storied past, and every one of us can personally connect to our remarkable history. It is imperative to understand that what divides us is insignificant in comparison to what we hold in common.

Encouraging unity and fellowship among classmates with differing customs will help them grow stronger and prouder of their Judaism. By respecting and appreciating one another, they can actualize this strength and form long lasting bonds.

The benefits of creating a warm and embracing religious culture in a school are very rewarding. I have been fortunate to witness some of these returns in my current students. The sense of pride they feel when a family custom is validated and valued is wonderful. The unity found in our *tefilla* is admirable, as both Ashkenazic and Sephardic students feel comfortable when we pray in either *nusah*. Many of the students even feel fluent enough to lead as *Hazzan* with either the Ashkenazic or Sephardic text.

The following story, which I heard from Rabbi Yissachar Frand, encapsulates the importance of unity. In 1980, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky (*z"l*) visited Israel. At that particular time in his life, Rav Yaakov felt extremely weak. Because of his physical condition, he did not travel around much, nor did he give many *shiurim* while in Israel. However, Rav Yaakov said, "I want to go to one Yeshiva—I want to go to *Yeshivat Kol Yaakov*."

Rav Yaakov was taken to this yeshiva, and he was asked to speak. Rav Yaakov was crying as he told the students, "My entire life I wanted to greet *Mashiah*. I now feel that I won't have this merit; I don't feel that I'll live much longer. But, if I can't greet *Mashiah*, at least I want to be among a group of people that I know for sure, will be among those who greet *Mashiah*. I know that this yeshiva will be among those that will greet him." What was so special about this yeshiva? Rav Yaakov said that this yeshiva was special because it made peace between Ashkenazic and Sephardic students. The yeshiva made *shalom* between these two segments of the Jewish people and opened their doors to both groups of Jewry.

The last *Mishna* in *Shas* (*Uktzin* 3:12) states: “The Holy One, Blessed be He, found no vessel to hold blessing for Israel other than (the vessel of) Peace.” May we be privileged to promote peace and sensitivity to others and in turn merit the coming of *Mashiah* speedily in our days.