Minhagim: Divinity and Diversity

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Dr. Daniel Sperber's monumental studies on *minhagim* (*Minhagei Yisrael: Mekorot veToledot*), have received wide and justified acclaim. He has painstakingly analyzed the sources of many customs and traditions, and has traced their development over the centuries. He has demonstrated how and why customs arose as they did, for example, due to variant readings and interpretations of texts, specific religious outlooks, societal realities, and so forth.

One profound truth that underlies his research is that *minhagim* arose as an expression of piety. Jewish communities adopted various customs because they thought these practices enhanced their religious observance and brought them closer to the Divinity. Another profound truth underlying his research is that *minhagim* reflect a lively diversity within Jewish religious life. While *minhagim* are intended to relate all Jews to our One God, they do so through a variety of channels, allowing for significant diversity of practice.

Once *minhagim* have taken root, adherents have become emotionally attached to them and consider them as essential aspects of their religious devotion. They come to feel that *minhag* is on par with—or even more important than—halakha, and that *minhag* ties us not only to our God but also to our ancestors. "*Minhag avoteinu be-yadeinu*" is a phrase that evokes powerful feelings of loyalty to the traditions adopted by our forebears. Each of us observes Judaism through the prism of the *halakhot* and *minhagim* that we have inherited from our parents and grandparents, or that we have adopted by becoming part of

a particular community.

Because our religious experience is so intertwined with our *minhagim*, we may find it jarring to come into contact with other—quite religious—Jews who observe *minhagim* different from ours. We don't feel entirely "at home" with them; we may think that their practices are quaint, or odd, or just plain wrong.

Rabbi Eliezer Papo, in his classic *Pele Yoetz*, describes the feelings of an Ashkenazic Jew who finds himself among Sephardim, or a Sephardic Jew who finds himself among Ashkenazim.

> When the Torah speaks of compassion for strangers, it refers not only to proselytes, but also to any friendless person far from home whose spirits are low and whose heart is broken.…This mitzvah applies to helping an Ashkenazi who finds himself among Sephardim, or a Sephardi among Ashkenazim.[1]

While Rabbi Papo referred generally to the gulf between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, there are vast differences of custom within the Sephardic/Middle Eastern Jewish world, just as there are vast differences within the Ashkenazic/Eastern European world. While Jews of many languages and many lands worship the same God, they do so with diverse traditions, worldviews, and social contexts.

In the pre-modern world, Jews tended to have little interaction with coreligionists of different backgrounds and traditions. They came to think that their particular practices represented normative Judaism. If they found themselves among Jews with other cultural/religious characteristics, they may well have felt themselves to be "strangers."

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began a period of *kibutz galuyot*, when significant numbers of Jews of various backgrounds came together and had to deal with each other on an ongoing basis. The mass migration of Jews to the United States brought in hundreds of thousands of Yiddish-speaking Jews, and as many as 50,000 Jews whose native tongues were Judeo-Spanish, Judeo-Arabic, or Judeo-Greek. The Jewish demography of the land of Israel was also to undergo dramatic change. The old Yishuv's historic Sephardic communities, as well as the traditional Ashkenazic communities, were engulfed by the influx of largely non-Orthodox Ashkenazic Zionists and Halutzim. During the 1930s and

1940s, refugees from Nazi Europe found their ways to Israel; in the early years of Israel's statehood, hundreds of thousands of Jews from Muslim lands in Asia and North Africa came to live in Israel. The diversity of Jewish Israelis was enhanced by the arrival of Jews from the former Soviet Union, Ethiopia, Western Europe, North and South America, South Africa, India, Australia, and so forth. In short, the intermingling of Jews of different cultural and religious traditions became a new reality. A question for the religiously-observant community was: How shall we respond to this incredible diversity?

Since the large majority of the world's Jews was Ashkenazic, primarily of Yiddish-speaking background, this group naturally tended to see Judaism through its own eyes. Those of other backgrounds were either ignored or viewed as being quaint or exotic. The prevailing assumption among religiously observant Ashkenazim seems to have been that these "deviant" groups of Jews would/should assimilate into the normative Ashkenazic mainstream. Jewish cooking meant Ashkenazic cooking; Jewish names meant Ashkenazic names; Jewish language meant Yiddish; Jewish Torah learning meant Ashkenazic *yeshivot*; Jewish customs meant Ashkenazic customs.

Dr. Aviva Ben-Ur, in her study of the American Sephardic experience, describes a phenomenon which she calls "coethnic recognition failure," the denial of a fellow group member's common ethnicity.[2] Thus, while Ashkenazim and Sephardim are fellow Jews, coethnic recognition failure occurs when members of these groups do not recognize their shared ethnicity. Since the Ashkenazic establishment was largely in control of Jewish institutional life, non-Ashkenazim tended to be the victims of coethnic recognition failure. Dr. Ben-Ur writes:

> Levantine Jews, with their unfamiliar physiognomy, Mediterranean tongues, and distinct religious and social customs baffled their Ashkenazic brethren. In the words of a contemporary satirist, "how could you be a Jew when you looked like an Italian, spoke Spanish, and never saw a matsah ball in your life?"…The denial of shared ethnicity and religion was the most painful and frustrating reaction that Eastern Sephardim encountered in their dealings with Ashkenazim….[3]

The negative ramifications of coethnic recognition failure have been profound. The victims have had to struggle with deep issues of identity and self-confidence; their culture, traditions, and religious worldview have been marginalized. Many

have felt the need to shed vestiges of their “oriental” identities in order to blend in with the majority group. In the process, the Jewish people as a whole has lost vital and vibrant elements of diversity.

The painful feelings of being ignored and rejected have been articulated in such books as *The Other Jews: Sephardim Today* by Daniel Elazar and *We Look Like the Enemy: The Hidden Story of Israel’s Jews from Arab Lands* by Rachel Shabi.[4] But the issue goes beyond a negation of the value of non-Ashkenazic civilizations—these negative attitudes have led—and still lead—to overt discriminatory practices and policies.[5]

It is beyond the scope of this article to enter into a full discussion of the sociological, psychological, religious, and moral dimensions of coethnic recognition failure. Isaiah Berlin has noted that victims of “oppressed classes or nationalities” simply want to be recognized

> as an independent source of human activity, as an entity with a will of its own…and not to be ruled, educated, guided, with however light a hand, as being not quite fully human, and therefore not quite fully free.… Paternalism is despotic…because it is an insult to my conception of myself as a human being, determined to make my own life in accordance with my own…purposes, and above, all, entitled to be recognized as such by others. For if I am not so recognized, then I may fail to recognize, I may doubt, my own claim to be a fully independent human being.[6]

How is a non-Ashkenazic Jew supposed to maintain this essential feeling of being a “fully independent human being,” when he/she functions in a Jewish world that ignores or belittles his/her culture, or treats him/her paternalistically? One response is a militant rejection of the dominant group. The opposite response is to adapt and to assimilate—to the extent possible—into the culture of the majority. Most non-Ashkenazim find themselves somewhere between these two poles.

Those who are part of the “majority culture” do not always understand how their attitudes and words impact on those of the “minority culture.” Sometimes things that seem quite trivial can, in fact, have serious consequences.

In this article, I want to share my experience of four *minhagim*, and how coethnic recognition failure caused me much grief. This is not to be construed as a lament

or complaint—but as a means of explaining to the “majority group” what we in the “minority group” have had to confront. The experiences I describe can be multiplied many times over by other non-Ashkenazim.[7] The hope is that through greater awareness and empathy, we will function as a stronger, happier, and more diverse Jewish community. We are not calling for paternalistic condescension or tolerance. What is needed is a genuine recognition that in our various searches for Divinity, different Jewish communities have followed diverse—perfectly halakhic and proper—roads.

I was born and raised in the Sephardic community of Seattle, Washington. My paternal grandparents came to Seattle from the Island of Rhodes early in the twentieth century. My maternal grandparents arrived at about the same time from towns in Turkey. Both of my parents were born in Seattle. The language of the immigrant and first generation American-born Sephardim of Seattle was Judeo-Spanish. The customs and traditions were those that had prevailed in the old Ottoman Empire for centuries. The melodies and rituals of our synagogues were in keeping with those of the Jews of Turkey and Rhodes. I was blessed to be raised among pious, sturdy Jews, who had a profound sense of dignity and honor. For us, the Jewish way of life was not only normal and natural; it was happy, optimistic, and lively.

Seattle’s Hebrew Day School, where I attended through eighth grade, may have had 25 to 30 percent of its students from Sephardic homes. No one would have known this from the manner in which Jewish studies were taught.[8] We learned that Jews eat latkes on Hanukkah—but we Sephardim didn’t eat latkes, or even know what latkes were! We ate bourmuelos on Hanukkah! We learned that Jews pray with certain melodies—but in our synagogues, we had entirely different melodies. We learned that “our” grandparents in the *shtetls* maintained an intense Jewish life. But our grandparents never lived in those *shtetls*. We learned the musical notations for reading Torah and haftarah—even though these were not the melodies we chanted in our synagogues. In short, there was a profound dissonance between what we learned Judaism was—and what we Sephardim actually did. There was little or no attempt to acknowledge diverse customs and melodies, legitimate differences of opinion in halakha and *minhag*. The teachers taught “real, normative Judaism”—and we Sephardim simply weren’t part of the story. Even Jewish history—to the extent that it was taught at all—had no references to Jewish life in Turkey or Rhodes, or North Africa, or the Middle East: Jewish history equaled Ashkenazic history, the experience of European—basically Eastern European—Jews. Discussions of the Shoah—as limited as they were—never mentioned the many thousands of Sephardic victims who perished alongside their Ashkenazic brothers and sisters.

Thankfully, I grew up in a family that had a strong Sephardic way of life, and this helped offset the things I was learning—and not learning—in school. But doubts lingered. Were we really Jews? Did our traditions have genuine value?

My first Shabbat at Yeshiva University in the autumn of 1963 was a moment of culture shock for me. That was the first time in my life I had ever seen chopped liver, or cholent, or kugel, or matsah ball soup. My classmates thought I was joking when I asked what these things were. Are you Jewish? they asked with feigned humor. I soon had to adjust to Ashkenazic "*davening*." Eventually, I even needed to learn enough Yiddish to follow the *shiurim* of my Yiddish-speaking Talmud teachers. I observed what my classmates did, and I wanted to fit in. Although everyone knew I was Sephardic—and very outspoken about this—they seemed to expect that I would somehow conform to the prevailing patterns and blend in. The unspoken assumption was that Yeshiva represents normative Judaism, and the rabbis there teach us normative Judaism; therefore, our search for Divinity must preclude genuine diversity. A quaint custom here and there is fine, as long as it does not threaten the rock-solid assumption that the "establishment" has the real Judaism and does things the really correct way.

Barukh Hu uVarukh Shemo

During my first year at Yeshiva, I learned that one is not allowed to respond "*barukh hu uVarukh shemo*" when wishing to fulfill one's obligation through the blessing of another person. Thus, for example, when family members hear Kiddush, they should only respond *Amen*. If they also say "*barukh hu uVarukh shemo,*" this is considered to be a "*hefsek,*" an interruption that invalidates their fulfillment of the mitzvah.

When I told my teacher that our custom was for family members to respond "*barukh hu uvarukh shemo*" when my father or grandfather recited Kiddush, he answered quickly and confidently: "Your family is doing it incorrectly. Your family members are not fulfilling the mitzvah."

Although this seems like such a minor issue, it had a powerful impact on me. My teacher was saying—without the slightest hesitation or doubt—that my family's traditions were not reliable, that I could not trust my father or grandfather any longer. If they were wrong on this practice, they might well be wrong on so many other things.[9]

When I returned to Seattle for Pessah in 1964, I told my father what I had learned, and asked that we change our incorrect practice. We should no longer be responding with "*barukh hu uVarukh shemo*." My father was astounded and pained by my request. He said: We have always had this practice. Even in Rhodes and Turkey, where they had great *Hakhamim*, they had this practice. It cannot be wrong. My response to my father was: You are paying a lot of money to send me to Yeshiva, and this is what I learned from my teachers there.

Our family stopped responding "*barukh hu uVarukh shemo.*" Now, finally, we could fulfill the mitzvah of Kiddush properly, after so many years (generations!) of incorrect practice.

In 1992, a year after my father's death, I bought a set of books in a Jerusalem book store: *Minhagei haHida*. The book is a compilation of *minhagim* as found in the writings of Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (1724–1806), along with a commentary by Rabbi Reuven Amar.

In Siman 21:3 in the section dealing with customs relating to blessings, I read:

> *Minhag ha-olam la-anot "barukh hu uVarukh shemo" ke-she-shom'in azkarat Hashem, gam bivrakha she-yotse'im bah yedei hovatam, kegon Kiddush, havdalah, shofar umegillah, ukhyotsei bahem, ve-ein limhot bahem*.
>
> The universal custom is to respond "Blessed be He and Blessed be His Name" when God's name is mentioned, also in a blessing where they fulfill their obligation [by listening and responding to someone else recite the blessing], such as Kiddush, havdalah, shofar, and Megilla, and other similar situations, and one should not prevent them from doing so.[10]

Although the widespread custom is to respond with *barukh hu uVarukh shemo*, the text goes on to say that it is nevertheless appropriate to refrain from saying this phrase when wishing to fulfill one's obligation through the blessing of another person.

Our family, then, had been following *minhag ha-olam*, the universal custom, and the Hida said *ein limhot beyadam*—people should be allowed to continue with this practice. Rabbi Amar's commentary on this passage cites a number of Sephardic sages who not only tolerated, but taught positively that one *should* respond with *barukh hu uVarukh shemo*. For example, in his commentary on the Haggadah, the great nineteenth-century sage of Izmir Rabbi Hayyim Palache specifically instructed the head of the household to remind his family and guests to respond *barukh hu uVarukh shemo* and *Amen* to each of the blessings he recited on their behalf. Rabbi Israel Abuhatseira, known popularly as Baba Sali, insisted that people respond *barukh hu uVarukh shemo* when he recited Kiddush. Rabbi Amar concludes that the custom to respond *barukh hu uVarukh shemo* was established by sages; it is a holy custom with strong foundations.

> And this custom is widespread among all Sephardic communities east and west; as we have seen that it was customary in Italy, Greece, and Turkey, and all the countries of North Africa; and also in the Holy Land many have followed this practice.[11]

When my teacher at Yeshiva told me that my family's custom was incorrect, it was *he* who was wrong. He simply did not know that there were alternative traditions on this issue. Nor was he interested in looking into the matter. As far as he was concerned, he knew normative Jewish practice; anything that deviated from his knowledge was discarded. As a student, I deferred to my teacher's knowledge; I did not learn that his knowledge was deficient until many years later. Because of his teaching, he caused me to uproot a perfectly valid custom of our community, to upset my father and our family, and to cause me to doubt the validity of other of our customs and traditions.

There is, of course, a halakhic basis for considering *barukh hu uVarukh shemo* to be an interruption. According to this view, the listener must concentrate on the words of the person reciting the blessing so as to be able to fulfill the obligation by saying *Amen*. Any extraneous words can break the concentration, and can be construed as an interruption.

However, the widespread Sephardic custom also has a solid basis. After all, how can words blessing God and His name be construed as an interruption? On the contrary, saying *barukh hu uVarukh shemo* actually increases the attentiveness of listeners. Since these words are not extraneous but are germane

to the blessing, they do not constitute an invalidating interruption.

It would have been so much better if my teacher had been knowledgeable about and sensitive to different *minhagim*. Instead of declaring our family's custom to be incorrect, he could have said: "There are differences in practice between Sephardim and Ashkenazim. I don't know the source of your custom, but I will try to learn more about it. Why don't you also try to find out more about your custom and why your family has this practice?" It would have been so nice if he had taught the class—Ashkenazim and Sephardim alike—the importance of appreciating variations in custom within the diverse communities of Jews.

Standing for the Ten Commandments

In our Sephardic congregations in Seattle, it was customary to remain seated during the Torah reading. This was true also when the Torah reading included the Ten Commandments.

When I attended Yeshiva, I soon noticed that some fellow students sat and others remained standing during the Torah reading. When it came to Parashat Yitro, though, all the students stood for the chanting of the Ten Commandments. I also stood, out of respect for the prevailing custom.

After services, I inquired of friends about the custom of standing for the Ten Commandments. They were incredulous that I had grown up in a synagogue where the congregation remained seated. Was I Orthodox?

I asked teachers, and was told that "the" custom is to stand for the Ten Commandments, as a re-enactment of the Revelation at Mount Sinai. When I was in my synagogue in Seattle during the summer, I stood up during the recitation of the Ten Commandments in *Parashat Va-et-hanan.* I felt odd being the only one to stand while the entire congregation was seated; but I had learned the truth in Yeshiva, and I had to do that which is right in the eyes of the Lord. Following services, I discussed the custom with our rabbi—who was of Ashkenazic background—and he told me that it was indeed correct to stand for the Ten Commandments, but he did not want to create a stir by asking congregants to change their accustomed practice. This served to underscore how wrong our traditions really were.

Years later, I learned that the custom to remain seated during the reading of the Torah has a venerable history, and that the Ari haKadosh remained seated during the Torah reading. I also learned that the custom to remain seated during the Ten Commandments was a longstanding and valid tradition.[12] It was based on the notion that all the Torah—from beginning to end—is holy. To stand only for the Ten Commandments would give fuel to the belief of the *minim* that only the Ten Commandments were given by God. We remain seated to demonstrate the equal holiness of every word of Torah. (The sages did not require us to stand for all Torah readings, since this would be a terrible imposition on the public; and since the Ari himself did not stand.)

When I was working on my doctoral dissertation at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University, I researched the history of the Jews of the Island of Rhodes. I came across a responsum of the eighteenth-century Rabbi Eliyahu Israel, who was born and raised in Rhodes and went on to become rabbi in Alexandria, Egypt.[13]

The question was: May a person be stringent with himself and stand for the Ten Commandments in a congregation where the custom was to remain seated? Rabbi Israel responded:

> It is obvious that one is not permitted to do so because it appears presumptuous [*mehzei ke-yuhara*]....Moreover someone who does so [stands] in the presence of Talmidei Hakhamim greater than he, is deserving of excommunication [*nidui*].

If a self-righteous person stands while others are seated, this gives the impression that only he is truly scrupulous about honoring the Torah, while the rest of the congregation are not properly honoring the Torah.

I had now come full circle. First I learned that our custom was wrong. Then I willfully violated my synagogue custom so that I would be in conformity with the "correct" custom that I had learned in Yeshiva. Then I learned that our custom had a proper basis after all. Then I learned from the responsum of Rabbi Eliyahu Israel that I was guilty of *nidui* for having stood up for the Ten Commandments in our synagogue where the custom was to be seated! Each step in this process caused much stress and inner turmoil. If only I had learned from the outset that Sephardim and Ashkenazim had different customs in this matter, and that both

customs are worthy and respectable.

Wearing *Tzitzith* Outside One's Pants

When I attended Yeshiva, some students wore their *tzitzith* hanging outside their pants, while many others did not. With the passage of time, though, an increasing number of students—especially the more devout ones—put their *tzitzith* outside their pants.

In one of our study sessions, we read the *Shulhan Arukh* (O.H. 8:11) who ruled that the mitzvah of the *Tallit Katan* entails wearing the *tzitzith* "on one's clothes" so that one will always see them and remember God's commandments. We then read the *Mishnah Berurah* on this passage (no. 26):

> Those men who place their *tzitzith* within their pants, not only are they hiding their eyes from what is written [in the Torah], "and you shall see them and remember etc.," but moreover they are disgracing [*mevazin*] a commandment of God; in the future they will have to stand in judgment for this.

Thus, not only may one wear the *tzitzith* on the outside; one must do so, or face the consequences in the next world for having abused one of God's mitzvoth. It could not be clearer.

The only problem was that I wore my *tzitzith* inside my pants. I had never seen anyone in my community—even the most pious—who wore their *tzitzith* outside the pants. So I assumed that we were wrong yet again. We just were not as religiously correct as the Ashkenazim.

After reading the *Mishnah Berurah*, how could I possibly keep my *tzitzith* inside my pants? So I pulled them out.

As long as I was in Yeshiva, this was fine. But when I returned home with my *tzitzith* out, family members and friends were surprised—even upset. Was I becoming a fanatic? I read them the *Shulhan Arukh* and the *Mishnah Berurah*,

much to their consternation. One of my uncles, who was born and raised in Turkey, replied: This isn't how we do it. We wear *tzitzith* in our pants, never on the outside. I smugly showed him the texts, and let him know that we had always been doing it incorrectly.

What I experienced was similar to what thousands of Sephardic yeshiva boys have experienced when attending Ashkenazic yeshivot. The mainstream is Ashkenazic. The laws and customs are Ashkenazic. If one has different customs and traditions, they simply do not count. The teachers seldom if ever acknowledge diverse customs (except perhaps within the Ashkenazic world itself). The students listen to their teachers. The environment fosters uniformity.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, dealt with the issue of how to wear one's *tzitzith*. He indicated that although the *Shulhan Arukh* called for wearing the *tzitzith* so that they can be seen, the Ari haKadosh held otherwise, teaching that according to the kabbala, *tzitzith* must *not* be worn outside one's pants. Virtually all Sephardic *posekim* have followed the opinion of the Ari, not that of the *Shulhan Arukh*. Rabbi Halevy notes:

> In truth, we have never seen even one of the Sephardic hakhamim and rabbis who has removed the *tzitzith* outside the pants; certainly they took into consideration the opinion of the kabbalists, and the ruling of the Hida whose rulings we have accepted.[14]

Rabbi Halevy indicated, though, that if a Sephardic student felt a great need to wear his *tzitzith* outside his pants, he was allowed to do so.

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef also explained the sources for the Sephardic custom to wear the *tzitzith* of the *Tallit Katan* inside one's garments. He took issue with the *Mishnah Berurah*, noting that those who wear their *tzitzith* inside do so on principle (based on kabbala), not from fear of ridicule from non-Jews. He concluded that it is right and proper for Sephardic students in Ashkenazic yeshivot to wear their *tzitzith* inside.[15] They should not change their custom.[16]

When I was in Yeshiva, I had worn the *tzitzith* outside for a year or so; then, somehow I decided to return to my original practice of wearing them inside. I had not known at that time of the rulings of Rabbis Halevy and Yosef, but was happy later to read their writings confirming my intuitive decision. I tucked in my

tzitzith because I came to feel that it was pretentious [*yuhara*] to wear them hanging outside my pants.

Family Names

To Ashkenazic ears, Sephardic names often do not sound “Jewish.” My grandfather, Marco Romey, used to tell us how he and fellow Sephardic immigrants were not recognized as Jews by Ashkenazim in Seattle. After all, how could names like Alhadeff, Policar, De Leon, or Calvo be Jewish?

Yet, names are vital components in a person’s identity. I found it (and still find it) annoying when fellow Jews display perplexity about the Jewishness of my name, Angel. Actually, Angel is a good Jewish name going back to medieval Spain. Many illustrious Jewish Angels lived in Salonika, Rhodes, Alexandria, Sofia, Damascus, and throughout the Ottoman Empire. Yet, as a student in Yeshiva, my Yiddish-speaking Rebbes invariably called me “Engel”—even after I corrected them many times. To them, Engel was “Jewish;” Angel was not. I’ve grown accustomed to the question: What was your real name before it was changed to Angel? The questioners do not even imagine that Angel was the original, Jewish name.[17]

Anyone familiar with Sephardic civilization knows how important family names are to Sephardim. They are badges of pride and honor. Most Sephardic communities have the custom of calling a man for an *aliya* to the Torah by his full name, including his family name. A Ladino proverb has it that *basta mi nombre ke es Abravanel*; my name is enough, it is Abravanel, i.e., if I have a distinguished family name, this gives me a sense of importance and self-worth.

About 40 years ago, a classmate at Yeshiva asked me to be a witness on the *ketubah* for his wedding. The *Mesader Kiddushin* was his Rosh Yeshiva, an elderly sage who had been born and raised in Eastern Europe. A large crowd, including many of our mutual friends, gathered in the room for the signing of the *ketubah*. The Rosh Yeshiva asked me to sign on a blank piece of paper before signing the *ketubah*. I complied and wrote my name on the paper: *Mordecai ben Hayyim Angel*. The Rosh Yeshiva asked me: “What is that last word in your signature?” I answered, “That is my family name, Angel.” The Rosh Yeshiva answered with perfect coethnic recognition failure: “Jews do not have last names.” I replied: “I am a Sephardic Jew, and Sephardim do have last names. We

sign with our last names." The Rosh Yeshiva stared at me and repeated: "Jews do not have last names." He motioned me to the side, declaring me to be an invalid witness. In the presence of numerous guests, including so many of my friends and classmates, the Rosh Yeshiva had found me unfit to sign a *ketubah*. I wasn't Jewish, since Jews don't have last names! I was so shocked and humiliated by this horrifying rejection, that I felt I was going to faint. My friend, the bridegroom, tried to console me. But there was no consolation. I was publicly repudiated by a venerated Rosh Yeshiva. My name and reputation as an upstanding Jew were negated in the presence of numerous guests. Even after 40 years, I still feel the burning shame and anger I felt on that occasion.

The next day, I went to top officials of Yeshiva to complain about the injustice perpetrated against me by that Rosh Yeshiva. All gave me the same basic answer: "He is an elderly Rebbe; he meant no harm; let it go." Not one of the officials of the Yeshiva suggested that the Rebbe ought to be rebuked for his behavior, or that he even owed me an apology. (He never did apologize.)

There is a long tradition of Sephardic and Italian Jews signing *ketubot* using their family names, going back into the medieval period.[18] Great rabbis approved of this practice, and indeed followed this practice. Yet, the Rosh Yeshiva—unaware of a legitimate Jewishness outside his own framework—declared that "Jews do not have last names."

I discussed this experience with Professor Daniel Sperber, in a telephone conversation on March 15, 2010. Dr. Sperber indicated that it is now fairly common practice in Israel for Ashkenazim as well as Sephardim to sign *ketubot* using their family names. This is not merely a matter of family pride, but is a more accurate way of identifying the signatory. The Rosh Yeshiva who long ago had humiliated me, would be surprised to learn that Jews—including Ashkenazic Jews—do indeed have last names.

Conclusion

It is not realistic to expect members of any group of Jews to be fully familiar with customs and traditions of all other groups of Jews. But it is imperative for members of all groups of Jews to recognize that other Jews also have proper customs and traditions. Instead of ignoring or sneering at or disqualifying traditions unfamiliar to us, we need the humility and intellectual

openness to be sensitive to the legitimate diversity within halakhic Judaism.

A broader and deeper understanding of halakha and *minhagim* should increase our appreciation of the magnificent corpus of Jewish religious traditions; should diminish the evil of coethnic recognition failure; should give rightful status to the Jewish "minorities;" should enhance the Jewishness of the Jewish "majority."

In our universal quest to serve the Divinity, we must appreciate the unique value and power of our Jewish diversity.

[1] Eliezer Papo, *Pele Yoetz haShalem*, Jerusalem, Tushia Press, 5747, pp. 99–100 (*Ger*).

[2] Aviva Ben-Ur, *Sephardic Jews in America,* New York and London, New York University Press, 2009, p. 108.

[3] *Ibid*., pp. 108–109. See also my book, *La America: The Sephardic Experience in the United States*, Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1982, pp. 41ff.

[4] Daniel Elazar, *The Other Jews: Sephardim Today*, New York, Basic Books, 1989; Rachel Shabi, *We Look Like the Enemy: The Hidden Story of Israel's Jews from Arab Lands,* New York, Walker and Company, 2009; Rachel Shabi, *Not the Enemy: Israel's Jews from Arab Lands,* New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009.

[5] See, for example, Yifat Bitton's article, "Old-Fashioned Discrimination, New-Style Battle," *Conversations,* no. 1, spring 2008, pp. 39–45, where she discusses the discriminatory policies of some Bais Yaacov schools in Israel, and the

existence of quotas for non-Ashkenazim in elite Ashkenazic-dominated schools.

[6] Isaiah Berlin, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, New York, Farrar. Strauss and Giroux, 1997, p. 228.

[7] The examples I offer from my personal experience date back to the 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. Unfortunately, the situation has not improved much since then—and in some ways has actually worsened. My son, Hayyim, who attended Yeshiva College in the early 1990s wrote an article for the school newspaper, *The Commentator*, which he entitled "Jews and Sephardim." He lamented that the pervasive attitude among faculty and students was that Ashkenazic Judaism was real Judaism; any reference to Sephardic history and tradition (after the Middle Ages) was either paternalistic or dismissive. The general "religious culture" among American Orthodox Jews today has become increasingly Ashkenazic, largely under the influence of ArtScroll which pointedly uses only Ashkenazic pronunciation of Hebrew. Agencies that used to supervise kashruth, now tend to supervise *kashrus*; the Rabbinical Council of America established a "*geirus* commission;" people whose names used to be David, Yonatan and Sarah, are now often known as Dovid, Yonoson and Soroh. When we buy kasher food products, we find labels indicating that the items are *pas yisroel* or made with *kemach yoshon*. In the various *yeshivos gedolos*, the black hat garb is universal, including the wearing of the *tsitsith* outside one's pants. The growing hareidization of Orthodoxy has led to a growing homogenization of Orthodoxy, generally in an Ashkenazic pattern. Since many of the *limudei kodesh* teachers, even in the Modern Orthodox school system, received their training in Hareidi schools, the tendency toward uniformity is exacerbated, with little or no interest in giving serious time or energy to exploring non-Ashkenazic traditions. For a discussion of the impacts of hareidization on American Orthodoxy, see Samuel Heilman, *Sliding to the Right*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2006. The situation I describe in the United States also manifests itself in Israel. The Heshvan 5771 (October 2010) issue of "*De'ot*," the journal of *Neemanei Torah vaAvodah,* is dedicated to Religious Zionism's blatant and consistent marginalization of Sephardic/Middle Eastern Jews. In order for Sephardim to flourish within organized Religious Zionsism, they have had to camouflage their "Sephardicness" so as to blend into the prevailing Ashkenazic patterns. Although Sephardic/Middle Eastern Jews are increasingly asserting their rights and their identities, the situation is still very far from satisfactory.

[8] The situation in elementary Day Schools in the United States has improved somewhat, especially in schools with significant numbers of Sephardic students. Yet, based on personal experience and conversations with faculty and parents from throughout the United States, I believe the problems described in this article continue to be pervasive.

[9] This problem, of course, goes beyond the issue of Sephardic identity and tradition. Many Ashkenazic students also have found themselves in situations where their "Rebbes" have invalidated family traditions. See Haym Soloveitchik, "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodox Society," *Tradition* 28:4 (summer 1994). Although beyond the purview of my present article, it is important to consider the impact of the current system of Torah education on female students—when very little (if any) attention is given to women's Torah achievements, outside of midrashically-framed tales of female biblical characters.

[10] Reuven Amar, *Minhagei haHida*, Jerusalem, *Makhon Mishnat Hakhamim*, 5750, vol. 1, p. 143.

[11] *Ibid*., p. 148.

[12] *Ibid*., p. 100. See also Shemtob Gaguine, *Keter Shem Tob*, vol. 1, London, 1934, p. 314.

[13] Eliyahu Israel, *Kol Eliyahu*, Livorno, 5552, no. 5.

[14] Haim David Halevy, *Asei Lekha Rav*, Tel Aviv, 5738, vol. 2, *Orah Hayyim*, no. 20. See also 3:2; 5:4; 8:5.

[15] Ovadia Yosef, *Yehaveh Daat,* Jerusalem, 5738, vol. 2, no. 1.

[16] Yitzhak Yosef, *Yalkut Yosef*, Jerusalem, 5745, vol. 1, pp. 21–22.

[17] The situation has improved in recent years due to the popularity of Angel's Bakery in Israel. Jews of all backgrounds are getting used to considering Angel as a Jewish name.

[18] See for example, Moses Gaster, *The Ketubah*, New York, Hermon Press, 1923; Jose Luis Lacave, *Medieval Ketubot from Sefarad,* Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 2002; Jeffrey S. Malka, *Sephardic Genealogy*, Bergenfield, Avotaynu Press, 2009.