The Syrian Jewish Community, Then and Now

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This article begins with a brief history of the Syrian Jewish community and their settlement in New York in the twentieth century. As other Arab Jewish immigrants joined, this united group of people has come to be identified as the Sephardic community of Brooklyn. These Jews of Sephardic and Middle Eastern heritage also hail from from Arab lands such as Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, and Israel, to name a few.

The unique characteristics of the Syrian Jewish community in America today are vestiges of the ways these particular Jews lived their lives in Syria, primarily in the cities of Aleppo and Damascus, over a thousand years ago. Their views on education, their societal constructs, their business pursuits, their search for homes in which to raise their families, and their refusal to accept converts are current practices rooted in the ways these Jews lived life in Syria, which were and still are tightly controlled by their communal and rabbinic opinions.

The most important values of Syrian Jewish men were to live a life dedicated to learning and practicing Torah and to provide for their families. For women, the top priority was to raise a family in the Syrian Sephardic tradition. For both genders, their goals could only be attained through fealty to the nuclear family and community while being insulated from outside influences. These expectations have largely been maintained through the present day.

The Flow of Jews in and out of Syria

The proximity of Syria and Israel allowed for the continued movement of Jews between these regions. According to biblical tradition, Jews began to live in Syria since the time of King David, when he defeated the Arameans at Soba or Aram Soba, which is Aleppo, and Aram Dameseq, which is Damascus. The second biblical reference to the region is from the book of Ezra, when Atarxerxes, the Persian king, ordered Ezra to appoint judges “beyond the river,” or Aram Soba.

Throughout that time, and continuing during the Babylonian and Roman conquests of Israel, Jews have lived in Syria.

Substantial immigration of Jews to Syria began in 1492 after the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula followed by the expulsion of Jews from Italy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Additionally, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European Jewish merchants, who planned only to visit Syria for economic purposes, found Syrian life suitable for communal as well as economic opportunities, and so remained in the Syrian communities of Aleppo and Damascus.

Emigration of Jews from Syria

The decline of the Jewish population in Syria began in the last part of the nineteenth century with several waves of emigration. As characteristic of other Arab countries at that time, Syrian Jews left for several reasons: Economic decline in Syria made it difficult to earn a living; Jews were being conscripted by Young Turks, who overthrew the Ottoman sultan and sought to strengthen the Turkish Empire; riots and persecution against Jews became increasingly frequent preceding and following the declaration of Israeli Statehood. Jews left Syria to settle in Israel, England, the United States, Mexico, Central and South America, and Jamaica (by way of Lebanon).

Emigration out of Syria persisted throughout the twentieth century. As the political situation of Syrian Jews continued to deteriorate under the French mandated region, followed by government instability, Jewish life was under continued threat from Arab riots. Jews were specifically forbidden to immigrate to Israel. Those who tried to escape the death and poverty in Syria faced prison or execution by the Assad regime. Attempts to escape were at the peril of the young men and women who dared; some who were caught and turned over to authorities were murdered after terrible abuse and torture.

American champions, such as Judy Feld Carr, Congressman Steven Solarz, and many community members who donated time and money to aid in the escape of Syrian Jews, managed to reduce the number of Jews trapped in Syria. The last wave of immigrants arrived in the 1990s. Most of the 50 or so Jews that remained since the civil war began in 2011 have left, and the number of Jews in Syria today is five or fewer persons.

Education

In the late nineteenth century, Alliance Israelite Universelle schools were established in Syria, as well as in other Arab countries, with the goal "to uplift and modernize Jews of the Middle East by imbuing them with French education and culture." Prior to that time, schooling for Syrian Jews was limited to the *k'tab,* the Talmud Torah for boys. Girls did not attend yeshivot. Although some rabbis were in favor of a more practical education, most preached against the predominantly secular education of the Alliance schools, preferring boys to continue to learn under the auspices of local rabbis and train as future Torah scholars.

Wealthy Jewish families of the bourgeoisie class moved to better neighborhoods and lived among Christian neighbors. The few Jews who could afford to pay for their sons' and daughters' private school education, taught by nuns and priests, did so over their rabbis' objections. Because the rabbis were beholden to benefactors for their subsistence, rabbinic objections that were ignored by the wealthier class of Jews eventually dissipated, and the rabbis' words went unheeded.

However, among the average Syrian Jewish businessmen, education was only valued as a pathway to economic mobility. Prompted by the rabbis, laymen pushed administrators at the Alliance schools to incorporate religious studies in the program. Under threats of reduced enrollments, most schools complied to some degree.

Although Syria was not recognized as an independent country until 1941, public schools were built in the early decades of the twentieth century. Children of all denominations could attend. However, by this time, the majority of Syria's Jews began emigrating, and the importance of education was not imprinted in the norms of the Syrian Sephardic community once they were settled in America. For the very few young men who sought a secular education either for professional purposes or for academia's sake, their only options were to pursue those goals outside their community's sphere and settle elsewhere.

In America, school attendance by first-generation Syrian Jews was mandatory. However, marriages of young brides, boys entering their fathers' businesses or pursuing independent economic opportunities, and strict adherence to Torah values while shunning secular life limited the opportunities to

follow through with a secondary education or college degree.
Over the last century, as the general finances of the Syrian community increased from peddlers' salaries and for some, to owners of million dollar corporations, private schools and higher education became options for all the community's children. As the number of sons outgrew their opportunities to earn a living in family businesses, the Syrian males started to seek employment as professionals in medicine and law. For the academically inclined, these career options have expanded to include areas in banking, accounting, and education.
When the national movements for equal rights and women's equality began to take root in America, the ideas permeated into the community, resulting in Syrian Jewish women joining the pursuit of a higher education.
Today, many young members are encouraged by their parents to strive for attendance at Ivy League institutions. On the other hand, there are parents who identify with opinions of some rabbis, wary of the problems associated with leaving the community and integrating into the American life found on college campuses.
As a teacher, I have heard the opinions of parents, adamantly opposed to their very capable high school student applying to an out-of-town college. In one specific instance, when I mentioned to parents that their child was a contender for an Ivy League acceptance, they were vehemently against the idea of him living on a college campus where Shabbat, prayer attendance, observance of mitzvoth and association with community members would be compromised.
At first I was surprised and even dismayed by the parents' refusal to consider sending their child to a highly regarded but non-local college. However, after more than 10 years of watching our community's children's increasing attendance to post-high school institutions, I am not certain the parents' decisions were disadvantageous to the students, at least on a spiritual level.
As endemic to American culture in general, strong dedication to religious and traditional observance by our community's youth is waning. To the degree that children's mindsets become more academic and scientific, their connection to the belief and practices of the traditions weakens. For this reason, it is imperative that Jewish educators focus on strengthening a genuine love for the values of Torah and at the same time, educate these children honestly and rationally.

Business Pursuits

Those in the community who do not pursue a college education are as financially driven as their academic counterparts. Men are motivated to work long and hard hours by the high value the community places on providing for their families, which today includes doing so to extravagant degrees: owning two homes; going away on luxury vacations; hosting highly attended and elaborate celebrations; and having domestic help at home.
As the pursuit of this expensive lifestyle persists and as the community increasingly faces tremendous financial strains to privately educate their children, dual income families are becoming more common for average community members.
Many women with or without a college degree are as ambitious as their husbands. Some have started their own businesses at home, often expanding into retail and wholesale operations to mass market their products and services, such as clothing, specialty foods, party planning, and more. In these cases, the role of the wife has evolved to include earning a salary that in some instances, may be competitive with or greater than that of her husband.
Her professional aspirations notwithstanding, the Syrian Jewish wife remains primarily dedicated to her family's religious and personal needs, holiday and Shabbat preparations, and community outreach.

Socialization

Arguably one of the most defining characteristics of the Syrian Sephardic Jew has been dedication to its community, to the exclusion of all others, Jews and non-Jews alike. The separation of Damascene,

Shamie, and Aleppan, *Halabi*, Jews led to separate schools, synagogues, and marriages in Syria and in the first century of immigrants in America. However, after a short time, second-generation Syrian immigrants, though aware of their different origins, mingled and married. Today, among all American Syrian Jews, there are few if any qualms about marrying people with different ancestral countries of origin.

Moreover, the greater Syrian Jewish community has begun to embrace their Ashkenazic brethren and progressively more of these diverse unions are taking place. Community rabbis have acknowledged the benefits of diversifying the gene pool and increasing the prospects of marriage for our children. This new approach is a result of the outward looking younger generation who are college educated, less insular, and more open-minded toward different hashkafot, leaving behind the very insular ways practiced by their ancestors less than a century ago.

Although parents in the Syrian Jewish community may have grown to be more accepting of marriages for their children to people less similar to them, often enormous resources and efforts are spent to ensure their children remain living close to home. Typically, married children will search for homes that are as close to their parents as they can find, and when financially capable, parents will purchase homes as near as possible to keep the family unit intact. If the two sets of parents live far from each other, the synagogue will usually be the deciding factor of where to settle.

Expansion of the Brooklyn Community

In the 1950s, the Syrian Jewish community began spending summers in Bradley Beach at the Jersey shore. Some people bought summer homes, and a few settled there permanently.

In the 1970s, the relaxed atmosphere, more sparsely populated areas, and more spacious homes lured tens of families to buy homes in the Deal area of New Jersey and live there year-round. Synagogues were established, and although Hillel Yeshivah had been founded in 1950, many pioneer children were educated in public schools.

Over the last 40 years, Syrian families have moved either temporarily or permanently to New Jersey and continue to do so. Young couples today are increasingly considering the move to Jersey to ease the financial burdens facing growing families. Buying or renting there year-round eliminates the summer home expenses, in addition to the much more affordable housing options. Moreover, the Jewish Day Schools in New Jersey are less expensive, as is the suburban lifestyle. By rough estimates, this satellite community has grown to hundreds of families in the winter months and thousands in the summer.

In the past 10 years, a small number of the community's families have chosen to live in Manhattan for expanded school options, the easier commute to work, and the cosmopolitan lifestyle. The Safra Synagogue and the relatively new Magen David of Manhattan Synagogue are the largest and most frequented Sephardic congregations. Additionally, the Sephardic Academy of Manhattan Preschool was recently founded to serve the academic and traditional specifications of the community’s youngest students.

Views on Israel

When Syrian Jews began emigrating from Aleppo over 100 years ago, some chose Israel as their new home, although this choice was relatively uncommon for Damascene Jews. In the Sephardic community today, one of the most unifying factors is a commitment to the State of Israel and its people. Sadly, some of the community’s Hareidi rabbis, while supporting learning in Israel, do not support the State of Israel. Thankfully, this is not common and not a strongly voiced opinion.

In the 1970s, there were very few mainstream post-high-school students who spent a year abroad studying in Israel, and almost all were males. However, with each subsequent decade, enrollment by Brooklyn’s Syrian Jewish students has steadily increased. In the last 10 years, the community has seen a surge in the number of males and females taking a gap year to study abroad in yeshiva in Israel. While most mainstream students attend for one year, some stay two years, a practice more common for the Hareidi students. Some graduates are choosing to complete their secular college education

in Israel, and others are making *aliya* as singles and as young families.
A surge in support and solidarity for Israel started during the intifadas. Beginning in the 1990s, community trips were organized in which adult males went to Israel to serve in some capacity in the army and to visit soldiers and patients in hospitals. Additionally, vendors were invited to bring their wares to sell at community boutique shows. All the while, community families were increasingly traveling to Israel with their immediate and extended families for bar and bat mitzvah celebrations.
The most impressive expression of fealty to Israel are the cases of young men leaving America to serve in the IDF for two to three years. One such man, when asked why he committed to such a grueling experience, as a lone soldier, and where the language barrier is a tremendous impediment, he replied, “I want to help Israel because I believe this our home; this is where we should be.”
A female who plans to join the IDF at the end of this year explains, “I can’t keep saying I care without actually doing something. I can’t, in good conscience, treat Israel like just another tourist destination."
Encouraged by the values, educational institutions and synagogues, by recent *olim* and by continued visits to Israel, the community can expect more of its members to make *aliya* in the future.

Religious Trends

One of the most radical religious changes in the history of the Syrian Jewish community has been the hareidization of the worldwide Sephardic Jewish community. Why did this proud community abandon its hashkafah? How did the transition to extremism take place? There are some explanations for this phenomenon.
In the old countries, there were enough hakhamim and yeshivot to teach the children and to train the generations that followed in each community’s unique traditions and halakhot. However, following emigration from their ancestral origins, that was no longer the case. After establishing their private yeshivot in America and other countries to where they migrated, schools had to find teachers who were well-versed in Torah and Hebrew language. When there were not enough educators from their own communities, school leaders looked to the more “religious” communities in Israel and Lakewood to recruit teachers. This was also true for the small number of adults who sought to pursue their religious education in the Ashkenazic learning centers of Lakewood and Baltimore.
Additionally, Hareidi-trained males needed to find wives who would at least tolerate and at most appreciate their alternate path. This was unlikely in their own Sephardic community and more easily accomplished in the Ashkenazic communities. Imparted with a Hareidi education and non-Sephardic wives, these teachers and rabbis have hareidified traditional Sephardic hashkafah and values, affecting a significant portion of the community.
This religious evolution is true not only of the Brooklyn community, but of Sephardic communities worldwide. The last half-century has witnessed a shift among groups within Sephardic communities towards an extremist view and practice of religion.
Many of Brooklyn’s Sephardic Jews are not content with the traditional, more practical approach to observance as taught by the rabbis of the Syrian communities in twentieth-century Brooklyn: Hakham Haim Tawil (b. 1860 d. 1942), Hakham Matloub Abadi (b. 1887, d. 1970), and Hakham Jacob Kassin (b. 1900, d. 1994). Sephardic communities have embraced Hareidi practices, such as full-time learning in kollel, women using wigs for hair covering instead of the traditional snood, and males donning black hats, white shirts, and black pants suits. Although the majority populations of the Sephardic communities worldwide are not living a Hareidi lifestyle, some view that way of life as the religious ideal.
In some cases, community families are no longer compatible as Hareidi rabbis impose greater stringencies and practices, such as dietary restrictions and Shabbat and fast observances, precluding their congregants from eating in other family members’ homes, parents included. Despite intelligent arguments against the relatively new stringencies and their violation of the spirit of Torah—and in many cases, actual halakha—extremist followers retort with the insistence that their rabbi’s word is final, after which the discussion is terminated and attempts to reconnect with family members collapse.

On the other hand, there are numbers of Syrian rabbis and their congregants who are committed to a relevant approach to Orthodox observance. They call themselves Modern Orthodox and are often more comfortable socializing with like-minded Ashkenazic Jews than with their Hareidi and intolerant Sephardic relatives.

Opposition to Outside Influences

Throughout Jewish history, financial, academic, and professional sacrifices have been made to protect and prevent the individual from leaving his/her community. In the Syrian Jewish community of Brooklyn, no action underscores this point more than the 1935 Proclamation on Converts issued by Chief Rabbi Jacob Kassin and signed by four other prominent rabbis of Brooklyn's Syrian Jewish community, including the head of the Bet Din, Rabbi Haim Tawil. The proclamation states,

… no male or female member of our community has the right to intermarry with non- Jews; this law covers conversions, which we consider to be fictitious and valueless. We further decree that no future rabbinic court of the community should have the right or authority to convert male or female non-Jews who seek to marry into our community.

Rabbi Jacob Kassin clarified this statement in 1946 and in 1972. It was reaffirmed in 1984.
The wording of the proclamation, conversations with the signatories, and the historical backdrop of its institution indicate that the letter was intended to prevent conversions for the purpose of marriages taking place after the proclamation. This point is more clearly defined in The Subsequent Clarification of the Original Confirmation issued in 1946, which states, "Our community will never accept any converts, male or female, for marriage. The rabbi will not perform any religious ceremonies for such couples, i.e., marriages, circumcisions, bar mitzvahs, etc."
The Subsequent Clarification states that the ban was issued against conversions for marriage, and ceremonies will not be performed for couples of those unions. The statement does not mention a ban on conversions *li'shma*, for their own sake. Additionally, Rabbi Zevulun Lieberman wrote in 1988, "Our ban …does not apply to descendants of people who underwent a legitimate conversion prior to 1935."
A community rabbi who was a disciple and colleague of Rabbi Jacob Kassin stated that Rabbi Kassin approved of and even performed marriages for those he considered sincere converts, such as children of converts raised as Jews and who had "come under the wings of the Shekhinah."
Despite these factors, today the practice of the Syrian community in Brooklyn is a complete ban on acceptance of any converts, even descendants of those whose children were married by Rabbi Jacob Kassin.
At times, this practice and extension of the proclamation seem excessive and have resulted in the alienation of sincere Jews, who all of their lives observed the mitzvoth and considered themselves part of the community. When it came time to date, these individuals were rebuffed by prospects and considered unacceptable. Sadly, these shunned members left the community, and most married non-Jews.
There remain a few third- and fourth-generation converts living in the community. As this article is being written, there is a young couple being denied a marriage performed and accepted by the majority of the community's rabbinical authorities, despite the fact that Rabbi Jacob Kassin approved of the marriage of the grandparents, one of whom was the child of a convert who became Jewish prior to 1935.
Many of the community's members are troubled by the tensions and obvious discrimination of the proclamation; however, it is difficult to argue the efficacy of the decree and the binding power it has over the community's people regardless of the degree of religious observance. As Rabbi Lieberman wrote, "The current situation in America regarding conversions, whereby most *gerut* is done for the purpose of marriage, represents a sham and travesty of the Jewish tradition. But the Sephardic community's approach is proof of the power of a *kehilla* to protect its heritage and

traditions."
With the rate of Jewish assimilation in America at 50 percent and many Jews unaffiliated with the religion or its practices, there are enough legitimate arguments to prevent any community-wide amendments to the proclamation, especially with the varying hashkafot of the Syrian Jewish community.

Conclusion

The Syrian Jewish community of Brooklyn is most unique, with a strong identity and pride in its values, traditions, and observances. As the community increases in size, educational pursuits, and places of residence, its characteristics become subject to outside influences, which affect the behaviors of its members. Over time, these forces have tugged at the tethers that restrain the community and keep it close-knit and uniform in its practices. One's tendency may be to think back longingly on the simple life of simple people who lived less complicated lives. However, we must appreciate the successes of the Syrian community: the establishment and growth of businesses; the founding of worldwide communities; many educational institutions and community outreach organizations; and the power that has resulted from these achievements.
With these accomplishments, we have much to look forward to as we broaden our commitments to Torah values and bringing about *tikun olam* beyond our borders.
May it be His will and let us say, Amen.