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Being Sephardic is one of the most central aspects of my Jewish identity. While there is certainly the ethnic component with family history that goes back to places such as Spain, Portugal, Italy, and Macedonia, there are the equally important dimensions that are philosophical and spiritual. These include a relentless optimism and an ability to look outward and be engaged in the world while also having a deep interiority in matters of the spirit.

Strangely, though, my Sephardic identity was largely dormant for half of my life. When my Jewish identity was ignited in my late teenage years, it would still be some time before having a robust exposure to the cultural and ideological wealth of Sephardic Judaism that would make it the dynamic force in my life that it has been ever since. Part of the reason for that is because Sephardic Judaism, beyond its external ethnic trappings, has yet to fully emerge into what one might call “Jewish cultural literacy.” In looking at the curriculum of Jewish life and thought that is dominant in America, one gets the impression that there have been no significant developments in the Sephardic world since Maimonides and R. Yosef Karo. In synagogue and university classes I attended, there were no discussions of enlightenment thinkers such as Isaac Cardoso, David Nieto, or Grace Aguilar alongside Mendelssohn; nor assigned readings in modern rabbis such as Rabbis Benzion Uziel, Hayyim David Halevy or Yitzhak Dayyan to consider together with luminaries such as R. Heschel and R. Soloveitchik. Yet, the Sephardic figures I just mentioned, among many others, represent remarkable strands of Jewish thought in realms such as ethics, political philosophy, theology, spirituality, and Jewish law.

And so, in my initial Jewish education, the ether was full of many extraordinary thinkers (which I do not by any means seek to disparage) but was largely lacking Sephardic tropes. Thankfully, I was blessed to meet Sephardic mentors who were able to transmit much of this remarkable heritage and fill in this lacuna. It is important to emphasize, however, that Sephardim do not have a special sensitivity that makes Sephardic thinkers compelling to us, any more than Ashkenazim have a special cultural sensitivity that makes R. Soloveitchik or R. Heschel great. Their greatness, along with lesser-known Sephardic thinkers, is inherent to the religious genius they embodied. Nevertheless, what Sephardim do have is a cultural appreciation and literacy to access Sephardic thinkers. In essence, this comes back to the notion of cultural literacy previously mentioned, and it brings us to the world of Jewish education.

The energetic debate around the virtues and vices of cultural literacy is not new. Proponents argue that cultural literacy, a common cultural vocabulary of historical figures, ideas, stories, and mythologies, is essential for the health of a nation as well as to ensure that there is greater social equality by giving all

students in schools equal access to this vocabulary. Detractors criticize that too often these cultural reference points are monolithic in their European whiteness and maleness, offering a very narrow perspective about who and what is worthy of attention in our society. A parallel debate exists in Jewish education but has yet to emerge into a powerful discussion about the appropriateness of its cultural canon. Regarding the American cultural literacy debate, Eric Liu, president of Citizen University and former policy adviser to the Clinton administration, convincingly argues that "The more serious challenge, for Americans new and old, is to make a common culture that's greater than the sum of our increasingly diverse parts."[1]

Like the American people, the Jewish community is diverse, with elements from every part of the globe, and our sense of cultural literacy should reflect that. If implemented successfully, a new Jewish cultural literacy can accomplish two critical goals. First, Jewish education can empower those whose cultural history has hitherto been under-represented. Second, it can create a sense of shared culture that draws from a truer, more diverse Jewish world that belongs to all of us, giving many more access points to students who may find their vibrant Jewish connection in a voice that is simply not being presented at this time. The presence of Sephardic perspectives in this endeavor is central. Said eloquently by Rabbi Dr. Herbert C. Dobrinsky, "...for those who seek a better appreciation for the 'unity in diversity' which has always been a hallmark of Judaism, the enlarged understanding of Sephardic Jewry's contributions to the preservation of our religious heritage is essential."[2]

In my own practice as an educator, I have laid out a personal goal of introducing my students to major thinkers and figures from the modern Sephardic world. Not only does this resonate with my students with family roots in places like Greece, Italy, and Iraq, but the perspectives offered by these presentations also serve as fresh insight for which other students demonstrate a profound appreciation. This begs the question as to best practices regarding the project of bringing greater diversity into the cultural literacy we teach in our schools. There are three major areas into which we can introduce such practices—and all are necessary if we are going to accomplish a genuine paradigm shift. The first is in teacher preparation. After all, we teach, draw resources from, and are passionate about, what we know. Next is in the realm of generating literacy lists, which must be done by a group of individuals in a school that reflect an exposure to the diversity that is being sought. Last is the realm of translation, which has a unique role given that a significant obstacle to bringing Sephardic thinkers into larger Jewish cultural literacy is the lack of available English translations of key works. In looking at these three areas and the daunting feeling that emerges upon doing so, I call to all our minds two of our classic teachings, "In every bit of toil there is some gain"[3] and "it is not upon you to finish the work but neither are you free to absent yourself from it."[4] In other words, any progress we can make in this arena will be very beneficial, a substantial improvement from where we currently are. It is incumbent upon us to move things forward in the ways we can.

Additionally, we have a chance in such a project as this to lay out not only the particular result we seek to achieve (in this case about Sephardic voices) but also to establish a model to ensure that Jewish Studies curricula continue to strive to be a reflection of the diversity that is a truer representation of the Jewish people.

Teacher preparation is at the base of the three aforementioned areas since it allows for a greater presence of Sephardic thinkers in classroom curricula, allows teachers to become representatives for currently under-represented thinkers or traditions, and requires some de facto translation work. The most organic way for a teacher to prepare in a way that allows her or him to bring Sephardic voices into the curriculum can take at least two forms. Both begin with choosing a particular thinker to become versed in. I recommend using works like Rabbi Marc Angel's *Voices in Exile* and Professor Zvi Zohar's *Rabbinic Creativity in the Modern Middle East*. These books, written with remarkable style and clarity, present a world of Sephardic thinkers in a way that makes their relevance immediately perceivable. A teacher can then delve deeper into a thinker that resonates with her through the bibliographies provided in each of these books. For those comfortable with Hebrew resources, the organization Mizrach Shemesh has developed classroom resources organized topically. From any of these points of departure, teachers can either present their thinker of choice in lessons centering around them as part of a series of major figures in Jewish thought or bring a thinker's perspective to bear on a theme-based unit. For instance, during a unit that teaches Mendelssohn and the emphasis on the

universal ethic of Judaism, equal time can and should be given to Rabbi Yitzhak Dayyan of Aleppo, Syria, whose articulation of the universal dimensions of Judaism's theology, practice, and mission is an invaluable voice. Alternatively, a teacher could, in the midst of a unit on Judaism and Civil Rights, take his class on a journey through the writings and activism of American Sephardic Rabbi Sabato Morais on behalf of immigrants and his moral charges denouncing slavery and the economic habits that encouraged it during the course of the American Civil War in addition to a lesson on Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's writings and activism with Dr. Martin Luther King Junior. In essence, Sephardic thinkers need to become a part of teachers' toolkits if they are to be become a significant dimension of their teaching, both because of the intrinsically valuable presentation of Jewish cultural diversity, as well as the fact that these thinkers represent unique approaches in areas to which they speak.

With the presence of teachers in receipt of this culturally diverse toolkit, they can play a role in another essential aspect of developing a more representative cultural literacy, namely, literacy lists. The idea of a cultural literacy list, as well as the term itself, were made popular by the educational theorist E. D. Hirsch in 1987. We have seen echoes of these types of lists in works such as Rabbi Joseph Telushkin's *Jewish Literacy* and George Robinson's *Essential Judaism*. Many Jewish Studies' staffs also develop some type of list that contain items that "a graduate of a Jewish Day School must know." Such lists can be very helpful as organizing ideas for curricula and as significant touch points for curriculum spirals; however, they can also fall into the trap of becoming a force for cultural hegemony. For that reason, lists should be developed by groups with diverse exposure, and it is teachers with significant knowledge of the Sephardic world who can help ensure that diversity. Furthermore, cultural diversity should be a stated goal of the list.

But what represents an adequately diverse cultural literacy list? There is not a single answer for all situations; however, an important guide comes from a parallel process to cultural literacy known as critical literacy. Critical literacy recognizes that the act of learning should not be viewed as "encoding and decoding meaning" and that "we need to understand that the messages of authors and the interpretations of the readers are bound by cultural, historical, and political lenses."[5]

Additionally, critical literacy pushes us to ask, "What is this text trying to do to me as a reader? Who is the intended audience of the text? Whose voice is included in the text, and who is left out?" In looking at lists generated by any Jewish Studies department, these are precisely the questions teachers should ask. Additionally, they should think about what answers their students would have to these questions, or even better, share potential lists with students to see what their responses are. Upon doing so, departments can then reflect about whether the answers to these questions are satisfactory and reshape the list based upon this process. It is important to remember, however, that the teacher preparation described above is a necessary prerequisite to this endeavor, since a person who has never encountered Rabbi Benzion Uziel, for example, will not be in a position to be aware that his or his tradition's voice is absent. Upon completion of that preparation, however, both the clear statement of cultural diversity in literacy as a goal, as well as the meta questions provided by critical literacy help set Jewish Studies departments on an appropriate path to a more representative Jewish cultural literacy.

Last, those teachers in a position to do so must take upon themselves to engage in the work of translating the Sephardic works that they bring to bear in their planning. As previously stated, the lack of materials available in English has been a significant factor in its absence in American Jewish schools. Works in Modern Spanish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, French, and above all, Hebrew, must be made readily available to teachers to weave into their curricula. Similar to the case of teacher preparation, a teacher who feels capable of this type of work can select a single larger text to translate or even major selections that help encapsulate a particular thinker's voice. With multiple committed individuals engaging in this, much progress can be made toward making these works available.

The requisite impact, however, necessitates a central repository for these translations from which educators can draw. Discussions have begun about possibilities for such a repository at the Sephardic Educational Center in Los Angeles, while the University of Washington has already done remarkable work creating a digital library of Sephardic works, particularly those from the Ladino-speaking tradition. Sefaria.org has also mainstreamed the open source approach for translations and perhaps developing a relationship with them to upload Sephardic texts of interest can be helpful. What is clear

is that we can no longer wait for someone to translate these texts; any who are able to do so must decide that they are the ones to bring the Sephardic to a wider readership.

For the purposes of this article I have focused on thinkers, but the model can be applied to customs, music, liturgy, and more. What is essential is the vision of a Jewish cultural literacy that more truly represents the Jewish people. One day, a Jewish student, regardless of his or her individual ethnic background, will see Syria and Poland as equal chapters in the Jewish story. Jewish schools will present voices from Lithuania and Turkey in beautiful harmony. "Jewish Heritage" will be a term that holds Morocco and Algeria as comfortably as Germany or Hungary, and each will be experienced as essentially Jewish as the other.

[1] Liu, Eric. "What Every American Should Know." *The Atlantic*, July 3, 2015, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/what-every-american-should-know/397334/.
[2] Dobrinsky, Herbert C. *A Treasury of Sephardic Laws and Customs*. (Ktav, 2001) p. XVIII.
[3] Proverbs 14:23.
[4] Avot 2:16.
[5] Gainer, Jesse. "21st-Century Mentor Texts: Developing Critical Literacies in the Information Age." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2013, pp. 16–19., www.jstor.org/stable/24034322.