Folk Wisdom and Intellectual Wisdom: A Study in Sephardic Culture

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Professor Sephiha has made monumental contributions to the study of Judeo-Spanish civilization. It is a pleasure to dedicate this essay to him, in recognition of his singular accomplishments.

When thinking about Judeo-Spanish culture, many people naturally tend to focus on the folk elements. Indeed, the Judeo-Spanish tradition is rich in folk traditions, as manifested in proverbs, stories, songs, and customs.
Folk tradition, by definition, is the domain of the common people. It reflects their wit and wisdom, their way of comprehending life. But along with the folk culture, the Sephardim maintained a vital intellectual life. An intellectual elite produced a sophisticated literature which reflected the best thinking of the best educated members of the community. In order to understand Sephardic culture, one must be attuned to the contributions both of the folk and of the elite.

The folk wisdom and the intellectual wisdom of the Sephardim derive from the same roots. While differing in expression, they articulate many similar ideas. A culture is a living organism. It is to be expected that all who are part of it - whether tending more to the folk or to the intellectuals – will share in the culture's general worldview.
In this essay, I will consider three themes in Sephardic culture, seeing how they reflect themselves in the folk wisdom and intellectual wisdom of our people.

1. Inwardness
A dominant feature in Sephardic culture is the respect for inwardness. A strong inner life is expected to develop self-confidence and self-respect; these lead to self-reliance. On the folk level, this value expresses itself in a number of proverbs:

"Consejo de tu companiero toma y el de tu corason non dexes. " (Take the advice of your companion—but do not leave behind that of your heart.)

"Poco que sea, mio que sea." (Let it be small, but let it be mine.)
"El diamente briya, pero al fin y at cavo es una piedra. " (A diamond glitters, but ultimately it is only a rock.)

These popular sentiments found expression in the *Me 'am Lo'ez,* the classic Judeo-Spanish biblical anthology initiated by Rabbi Yaacov Huli. In recounting the story of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments, the *Me 'am Lo 'ez* cites a relevant rabbinic teaching. When Moses first received the Ten Commandments, he ascended Mount Sinai alone. The people of Israel were gathered around the mountain. The revelation was accompanied by thunder, lightning and the sound of the ram's horn. This was a highly dramatic event. Yet, when Moses came down the mountain and found the Israelites dancing around the golden calf, he threw the tablets of the law from his hands, and they were shattered. Moses then ascended the mountain a second time. On this occasion, there was no public fanfare, no miraculous sounds and lights. God told Moses that he himself would have to carve out the stone on which the Ten Commandments were to be inscribed. This second set of the Ten Commandments, which Moses received alone and through his own labor, was preserved. The first tablets which were given with much dramatic flare were destroyed, while the second tablets, which were given privately and quietly, survived. From this, the *Me 'am Lo 'ez* teaches that the private exertions of an individual are greater and more effective than things done with much publicity and sensationalism. This lesson underscores the need for each person to have self-respect and self-reliance *(Me 'am Lo'ez* on Exodus 34: 1–3).

This idea also is developed in the teachings of Rabbi Yitzhak Luria of sixteenth century Safed. A central theme in his kabbalistic system was *tikun* 'correction'. Each Jew participates in the correction of the world by liberating sparks of holiness and lessening the forces of impurity. By performing the commandments of the Torah, Jews thus play a major role in preserving the cosmos. Regardless of one's degree of wealth or wisdom or social status, one is able to participate in the correction of the universe. This idea, widely adopted among Sephardim, inculcates a sense of self-worth and personal responsibility.[1]
Another element in the quality of inwardness is the awareness of holiness. Even simple and relatively uneducated Sephardim recognized the dimension of holiness in life. This very recognition has led to an inner spiritual humility, a sense of connection with the Eternal God.

On the folk level, this recognition of holiness was manifested in various ways. It was a wide-spread practice to read from the *Zohar,* the classic book of *kabbalah.* The *Zohar* was read with great devotion even by those who could not understand the words, nor even pronounce them correctly. Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai, a great 18th century Sephardic sage, praised the value of reading the *Zohar* even by people who could not read it properly. The very reading of this holy text was a way of deepening a person's awareness of the holy (Azulai 1879: 6).

In many communities, it was customary to kiss the hand of the rabbi as a sign of respect. In turn, the rabbi would offer his blessing. This custom reflects respect for what the rabbi represents i.e. Torah, God, holiness. Reverence shown to the rabbi was symbolic of reverence felt toward all that is sacred in Judaism. The outward fulfillment of this custom inculcated an inward respect for holiness.

On the intellectual level, this thirst for holiness showed itself in a number of ways. The great scholars of *halakha* saw in their study a direct link between themselves and the will of God. Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of the classic *Shulhan Arukh,* reported receiving angelic messages, prodding him to utilize his talents to study and teach halakha.

Throughout the generations, Sephardic intellectuals produced significant works of Jewish ethics and moral guidance. Among the classic authors in this genre were such figures as Rabbis Eliezer Azicri,

Eliyahu de Vidas, Hayyim Yosef David Azulai, Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, Eliyahu ha-Cohen, and Eliezer Papo. A chief characteristic of this moral literature is its stress on spiritual inwardness.

Each person has the possibility of improving himself spiritually. One may not be able to control the world, or his society, or even his own family: but he does have the possibility of learning to control himself. The ethical literature emphasizes the need for each individual to be strong from within.

One of the concepts in *kabbalah* and ethical literature is known as *hitbodedut*-- 'meditation'. This principle teaches that an individual must intellectually and spiritually isolate himself periodically, in order to focus completely on the ultimate truths. If the kabbalistic elite were able to master this practice, the masses were at least able to appreciate its value.

The folk wisdom and intellectual wisdom of the Sephardim were interrelated, each influencing the other, and both reflecting shared ideas and values.

2. Optimism, Joy in Life

The Sephardic spirit is generally optimistic, valuing the joy of life. On the folk level, this shows itself in the many celebrations held among Sephardic families, for almost any occasion. These celebrations include a wonderful variety of foods, fragrances, songs, dances. The Sephardic aesthetic sense appreciates a variety of colors. Even in food presentation, Sephardim utilize many vegetables of different colors.

The Sephardic attitude is reflected in an incident which occurred in the latter part of the eighteenth century. An Ashkenazic rabbi, Simhah ben Joshua of Zalozhtsy, made a pilgrimage to Israel. Many Sephardic Jews were on the same ship with him. The trip took place during the month of *Ellul,* just prior to *Rosh Hashanah.* This, of course, is the month when Jews recite *selihot,* special prayers seeking repentance for our sins. The month of *Ellul* is devoted to serious thought, prayers, and acts of repentance. The Ashkenazic rabbi noted, apparently with surprise, that the pious Sephardim awoke each morning before daybreak in order to chant the *selihot* prayers. Yet, "during the day, they eat and rejoice and are happy at heart" (Eisenstein 1969: 241). Even during this relatively serious season, the religious Sephardic Jews maintained the spirit of optimism and celebration.

This attitude is also evident in the synagogue melodies for the High Holy Days. In general, the music is upbeat and optimistic. The services almost totally lack music which sounds melancholy or tearful. This attitude of optimism is reflected in an important work by Rabbi Eliyahu ha-Cohen of eighteenth century Izmir. In his book, *Midrash Talpiot,* Rabbi ha-Cohen explains a Talmudic passage which lauds two jokesters who were said to have been granted eternal reward in the world to come. Rabbi haCohen wrote:

"Anyone who is happy all his days thereby indicates the greatness of his trust in God. This is why they (the jokesters) were always happy .... This quality (of accepting life with happiness) is enough to give a person merit to have a place in the world to come; for great is trust (in the Lord), even if a person is not perfect in all other moral perfections" (Ha-Cohen 1860: 73a).

3. Gracefulness, Good Manners

Many customs and practices underscore the importance of gracefulness and good manners. When a man is called to the Torah during synagogue services, his younger relatives stand in his honor. Youngsters kiss the hand of their parents and grandparents as a sign of respect. In return, they are given

words of blessing. It is not polite for younger people to look directly into the eyes of older people. Rather, the younger person should keep his eyes lowered, as a sign of respect.

Among the women, it was common to have *visitas,* little social gatherings during the course of the week. The hostess would invite some of her relatives and friends. She would prepare a good variety of baked goods and other specialties, and would serve everything on her best set of dishes. The ladies would attend, dressed in their best clothes, as though they were going to a formal party, rather than to the home of a friend or relative.
My mother explained to us the custom that when the hostess wanted the guests to leave, she offered them a certain confection made of marzipan. In popular parlance, this confection was known as the *passoporto* and was a signal to the guests that the party was over. This was a polite and respectful way to deal with a difficult social situation.

On the intellectual level, the importance of good manners and gracefulness was emphasized in works of Jewish law and especially in works of Jewish ethical behavior. A classic sixteenth century work, *Regimiento de La Vida* by Rabbi Moshe Almosnino, gives specific rules of etiquette which must govern one's life. Good manners were not seen as a superficial frill, but as a basic component of proper living.
The Sephardic model was idealized among nineteenth century German Jewish intellectuals.[2] Moritz Kayserling asserted that the religious behavior of Sephardim

was always so pure, so free of all hypocrisy, remaining forever one and the same, far removed from all incursions of vapid rationalizing, because it emerged united with science, which in turn kept it from ever losing its way. We must constantly acknowledge the benefit that wherever Spanish and Portuguese Jews settled, they spread culture, knowledge and solid learning.

Eduard Gans believed that Sephardim "are marked by less discrepancy in morality, purer speech, greater order in the synagogue, and in fact better taste".
Indeed, as a general rule it can be stated that Sephardim did lay stress on aesthetic considerations and orderliness. They have always taken pride in the beauty of their synagogues. Even the simplest and poorest synagogues are maintained with devotion; they are neat, clean, and pleasing to behold.

Concern for etiquette and aesthetics reflects the deeper concern for self-respect and respect of others. And, of course, it reflects respect for God.

This general tendency underlies the notion that Jews must function as ethical human beings, models of excellence who can be emulated by others. This idea found full expression in the writings of Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh, one of the important Sephardic intellectuals of the nineteenth century. In one of his books, *In Ethical Paths,* Rabbi Benamozegh demonstrates the profundity of the Jewish ethical system. In his work, *Israel and Humanity,* he thoughtfully argues on behalf of the universalism of Judaism. The ultimate teachings of the Torah are relevant to all peoples, not only to the Jews.

Rabbi Benzion Uziel, in his various writings, also articulates the ethical teachings of Judaism. All human beings, whether Jewish or not, are created in the image of God, and are therefore entitled to respect and dignity. Jewish teachings imbue the Jewish people with a strong ethical sense, enabling them to inspire others similarly to strive to live their lives on a high ethical plane.

Another related idea is the Sephardic discomfort with ideological confrontations. The natural tendency has been to try to maintain harmony, peacefulness and balance.

Sephardim, whether belonging to the world of intellectuals or the world of the folk, have tended to see the Sephardic approach to life as being imbued with compassion and tolerance. Rabbi Michael Molho, in his study of the customs and practices of the Sephardim of Salonika, has noted that Sephardic religious life shuns extremism and showy displays of religious observance (Molho 1950: 155).

This Sephardic attitude led to the maintenance of cohesive, traditional communities. At a time when the Enlightenment and Emancipation were tearing the fabric of Jewish life in Europe, the Sephardim maintained themselves as islands of respectful traditionalism. Whereas Ashkenazic Jewry divided itself into ideological movements -- Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and others—Sephardim rejected this approach. Rather, they stressed the importance of maintaining a united community, avoiding ideological confrontation and divisiveness. For the sake of keeping harmony and balance in the community, individuals recognized the need to reject ideological factionalism.

The above examples illustrate how basic ideas imbued the masses of Sephardim as well as the intellectual elite. They cannot be understood as peripheral ideas held only by one group or the other. Rather, they can be seen to be basic ingredients in Sephardic culture as a whole. These attitudes and ideas, which have been fostered by our ancestors for generations, are still vitally relevant to us and to future generations. Our task is to understand Sephardic culture at its best and to convey its message to Sephardim and non-Sephardim alike.

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[1] See my discussion in Angel, *Voices in Exile,* 110–116. See also Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, 116f. (Move all notes to endnotes)

[2] This information is drawn from an article by Schorsh, "The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy," pp. 52 and 63. (move to endnote)