

The Power of Foresight: Reflections on the Future of an American Sephardic Community

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“Who is wise? One who sees the future outcome.” (Talmud, Tractate Tamid 32a)

This famous statement by the Gemara challenges us to critically examine past and current issues, identify patterns and trends, conduct a thorough analysis, and if wise enough, act to achieve future desired outcomes. However, this approach demands that we be honest and realistic in our assessments, and not be encumbered or influenced by nostalgia or Golden Age thinking. Given our highly emotional nature as Sepharadim, this is no easy task.

All Jewish communities are dynamic organisms. Each community grapples with similar challenges of engagement, outreach, growth, membership retention, leadership and financial stability. Sephardic communities in North America are faced with these and more complex issues regarding their survival. Members of established Sephardic communities have become integrated into American society in the same manner as other Jewish groups who immigrated at the same time period. Over the last decade, the emergence of new Sephardic congregations reflects a demographic composed mainly of recent immigrant groups, primarily from Israel. In today’s globalized world, they do not undergo the same American Jewish experiences as did the immigrant groups who arrived a century ago. The older second and third generation communities are now in a state of flux as they either undergo existential transitions or are at the point of losing their identity to these new incoming groups.

Seattle’s Sephardic community, which has long enjoyed a reputation as a bastion of the rich cultural heritage, religious customs and liturgy of Levantine Judeo Spanish Jewry, is one such community concerned about its future. Founded in 1906, the community traces its roots to immigrants from Turkey and the Island of Rhodes. It is served by two synagogues, each reflecting its country of origin, a jointly run religious school, an independent summer camp and the Seattle Sephardic Brotherhood, whose primary purpose is to serve as the chevra kadisha, the burial society. Seattle is also the birthplace of many leading rabbis and educators serving other Sephardic communities, including Rabbi Marc Angel, Founder of The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

While no longer spoken as a living tongue save for some favored words and expressions, Ladino is still incorporated into many features of synagogue prayer services and holiday rituals. Our unique customs and liturgy have been successfully preserved so that were our great grandparents to enter the kehillot during tefila, they would feel most at home. We are fortunate that our grandparents and other learned community leaders taught us after school and through ritual observances at home. This informal educational infrastructure ensured the continuity of our traditions for my generation and for some, will continue to the next generation as well.

While the majority of Seattle's Sepharadim are not observant, with many having have joined Conservative and Reform congregations, there is still a sense of belonging, friendship, mutual respect, and a shared pride in our heritage, traditions and legacy within the overall community.

On many levels, the Sephardic experience in Seattle is no different than other American Jewish communities - the search for affluence and acceptance. Attrition, assimilation and intermarriage have taken their toll. Many families whose grandparents were traditional two generations ago are now completely assimilated. There is evidence of disengagement from communal institutions and a lack of interest in both Jewish and Sephardic identity.

Whereas the primary portal of engagement for our parents and grandparents was the synagogue, this is no longer the case. For the majority, their relationship to the synagogue is extremely tenuous, not meaningful or spiritually fulfilling, and based almost exclusively on their filial devotion. Synagogue attendance continues to decline, even on the High Holidays, and for most, their only other interactions are annual food bazaars or lifecycle events, mostly sad, where clergy is required to officiate. As the older generation passes away, there is little doubt that these relationships will suffer even more.

The Seattle Sephardic community has for the most part not benefited from Hansen's Law "What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember" or "the principle of third generation interest" as stated by the historian Marcus Lee Hansen. Hansen's Law is often used to interpret the immigrant experience. While the children of immigrants may devote considerable energy to discarding immigrant culture traits such as religion, their children may find them meaningful and identity forming.

Nor has the community received any significant benefit from the American Sephardic renaissance in the 1970-s driven by the formation of the American Sephardi Federation. This short lived phenomenon was eclipsed by the organized development and empowerment of Sepharadim in Israel. Our own inability to successfully create and maintain an organizational infrastructure on a national and local level also played a major role in its failure to have a lasting impact on the community.

Those who are committed to an observant lifestyle are faced with the additional challenge of the allure and attractions of the vibrant Jewish lifestyle and multiple resources that larger communities such as New York and Los Angeles have to offer their children. While some young men and women have returned to Seattle to raise their families, the trend to move away will continue.

More crucial are two issues that confront not just Seattle, but the majority of second and third generation Sepharadim in general-- intramarriage and the lack of articulating what differentiates Sepharadim from other Jews, and ultimately, the relevance of Sephardic Judaism (or Sephardism, to use the term coined by Rabbi Angel) and identity in the future.

Intramariage with Jews of non Sephardic backgrounds has resulted in blended families with a diluted sense of their Sephardic heritage and customs. The educational emphasis in these families is placed on fostering, promoting and maintaining a strong Jewish identity. This priority is shared by many Sepharadim who marry other Sepharadim, with the result being a lesser emphasis on Sephardic heritage. (Some communities, mainly those of Syrian and Persian origin, do not yet face this problem, and, given their significant numbers and insular nature, may never will).

In essence, this will be the Jew of Sephardic lineage in the post ethnic Jewish world. Given the fact that Sepharadim are vastly outnumbered, the future is that coming generations will be completely absorbed into mainstream American Jewish life, leaving their Sephardic heritage little more than a fond memory.

Hence the larger questions loom. What will those memories be composed of? Will they consist only of liturgy, ethnic music, exotic cuisine and joie de vivre? Are there really unique Sephardic values? Is there such a thing as a Sephardic ideology or (since no Ladino counterpart exists) *Weltanschauung*? Can it be that Sephardism arose in a unique milieu, and since that setting no longer exists, there is little of substance that remains relevant or transmittable? As one young man, a member of a blended family with a non Sephardic spouse put it: "We know we are different. We just don't know how."

If there is something unique about the values that constitute Sephardism, can they be defined, distilled, crystallized, and articulated so they can be transmitted to future generations?

Many claim that what distinguishes Sepharadim is our unique approach to modernity and life. We possess a set of values and worldview that allows us to navigate and enjoy the best of both worlds, maintaining our Jewish identity, Torah values, and traditions as we straddle past and present. Our hallmarks are moderation, non judgmental acceptance and tolerance of other's levels of observance. But today, many branches of Judaism, most notably Modern Orthodoxy and the Conservative Movement espouse similar ideals and approaches.

There is much we can be proud of. We have made invaluable contributions to both the Jewish and non Jewish world. The writings of our great Sephardic sages in the areas of thought, philosophy, liturgy, piyyut, Torah interpretation, mysticism and Halacha have been recognized and incorporated into the greater general wisdom of Torah. In particular, past Sephardic rabbis are now being hailed for their bold, innovative and even daring Halachic rulings and approach to dealing with modern concerns and dilemmas, especially in the current stricter religious environment. Contemporary opinions advocate that a Sephardic approach can resolve many of the current issues plaguing the

Jewish world and the State of Israel. In the secular world, Sepharadim are known for their contributions in the arts, literature, sciences, and philosophy.

Seattle's Sephardic communal future is predictable. We know that through intermarriage, assimilation, attrition and intramarriage the community will continue to decline. It will lose its unique identity and hallmark of "community". Eventually, Ladino will be eliminated as we come to realize that we would rather speak words we understand than words we do not. There will no longer be Sephardic synagogues, but synagogues in the Sephardi tradition. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that we have failed to identify and train spiritual leaders from our own ranks and background to guide the community's future.

To counter this decline, there are a number of specific things that Seattle's communal leadership can do. The creation of a community council would serve as a vehicle to bind the different organizations. Communal strategic planning would create a master plan to guide future development. A community wide genealogical project can be implemented to identify those of Sephardic heritage and serve as a means of creating a database for outreach. Cultural events can be created to provide additional entry points to engage the disinterested and disenfranchised. If done in context within a vision, there is a chance that the community can be rejuvenated.

However, if we cannot articulate a set of values and worldview, and devise educational methods to transmit them to future generations, it would appear that we too will suffer the same fate as the majority of Judeo Spanish communities around the world. We will be remembered solely for our quaint minhagim, soulful liturgy and melodies, and delicious food.

Rabbi Angel, in his excellent book, *Foundations of Sephardic Spirituality*, makes the following assessment. "Judeo Spanish civilization has reached its conclusion as a living, dynamic organization. There are no more communities in the world where Judeo Spanish is the mother tongue of the younger generations and there is no sociological reason for Judeo Spanish communities to emerge in the future..... The Judeo Spanish community has made vast contributions to Jewish life and lore, yet it now enters a new phase in the fulfillment of its distinctive mission. In this phase, its central teachings and experiences will be translated and incorporated into the general wisdom and culture of the entire Jewish people. "

Through the lens of foresight, we are empowered to become wise and shape the future. Seattle is the last vibrant Judeo Spanish community in the United States. Eventually though, it will undergo a complete transformation as its constituency evolves and factors beyond its control take over. Will we use our insights to ensure that our treasured Sephardic legacy remains relevant and transmittable or will we fade into the twilight as a footnote on the pages of Jewish history?