An Evolving Sephardic Identity

View PDF



This article appears in issue 13 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

An Evolving Sephardic Identity: Striking a Balance in an Age of Multicultural Diversity

by Rachel Sopher

I recently travelled to Spain, planning a relaxing vacation, my first trip to Europe. In preparation for the trip I read up on Barcelona, the city where we would be based, and asked friends about where to find kosher food and how to manage in a country where the Jewish presence was all but invisible.

Once in Spain I happily took in the sites, the architecture of Gaudi, the Picasso museum, and the rich local culture. On the last day of our stay, a fellow traveller organized a day trip to the ancient city of Girona, birthplace of the Ramban and home to The Jewish Heritage Museum of Catalonia. We hired a tour guide to take us through the museum and the old Jewish quarter of the city, excited by the prospect of familiarizing ourselves with the history of the Jews of Northern Spain. But my excitement quickly turned to disappointment as I realized that the museum and our tour guide were geared towards servicing the general Spanish populace, an overwhelming percentage of whom were completely unacquainted with Jewish culture. As we walked from room to room, and our non-Jewish guide explained the basic rituals of the Sabbath and the Mikveh to our group, my heart sank; I found myself feeling the connection to and loss of the rich Sephardic culture of Spain, all traces of which have been destroyed in the years since the Spanish Inquisition.

I was surprised by the rush of feelings sparked by the return of awareness of my Sephardic heritage and shocked by the way I had come to Spain with a total lack of concern for any historical connection. I have always taken particular interest in Sephardic culture and tradition and had studied the history of the Jews in Spain in college, spending hours reading up on its famous figures, the Rambam, Yehuda

Halevi, Ibn Gabirol. Gone was my idealization of the Golden Age of Jewish Spain; gone was the pride in my connection to this romantic past. As our group walked the narrow streets of the old city of Girona, I pondered the obliteration of the Jewish presence in Spain and its parallel, the disappearance of my Sephardic heritage from my mind. The trip left me identifying with the Jews who were forced to leave Spain during the Inquisition in my own analogous experience of cultural expulsion and left me wondering about my fickle relationship to my Sephardic roots.

As I pondered the questions brought up by my experiences in Girona, my thoughts led me to a consideration of the role of Sephardic tradition within a larger Jewish identity. Sephardic Jews comprise but a small and diverse subset of the greater worldwide Jewry, constituting what some might call a minority within a minority. Sephardic Jews in integrated communities face challenging choices when it comes to consolidating coherent religious and cultural identities. Navigating differences within a richly multifaceted group can be an intricate and formidable undertaking. How can an individual hold on to his unique background while remaining in close contact with a broader and more prominent culture?

It is a complicated venture to negotiate individual difference while retaining membership in a distinct overarching body. Sephardic Jews make up a heterogeneous subset of the Jewish world. The religious commonalities among different types of Jews are significant enough to provide an umbrella identity, a link through common history, religion and values, though this broad-ranging identity is largely defined by the more dominant Ashkenazic culture. To make assumptions about what it means to be Jewish is to accept stereotypes represented by Ashkenazic traits and to be gently folded into many broad expectations about what it means to be Jewish. Yet Sephardim are different enough culturally to warrant a discrete though overlapping classification. For many Sephardim, self-identifying as a Jew without cultural qualification can be a gratifying and connecting experience, one in which our commonality breeds deep affiliation; but this same prospect may also carry the risk of divergence and alienation, a gulf in experience that could lead to an emphasis on isolation or estrangement in the symbolic renunciation of difference. This conflict speaks to a question of identity; how can we celebrate our similarities and embrace differences without slipping into extreme position?

In a very personal way, this theme and variations on it have informed my relationship with religion throughout my life. Sephardic culture and tradition permeated my early experience to such extensive proportions that for some time their influence remained vague in the way that the most basic things about us remain indeterminate, a shadowy presence as an identity taken for granted in the naive assumption that this is just the way things are. At that time, in an uncomplicated way, the insularity

and homogeneity of my family and community life contributed to a strong sense of what it means to be Jewish, and more specifically what it means to be a member of a Sephardic family and community. These circumscribed sensibilities pervaded my day to day existence, organizing my experiences, and as such were ingested with the ease and passive receptivity of a child being fed on mother's milk. Some of my earliest memories revolve around my paternal grandparents, my Nona and Papoo as we called them; their house was the heart of our family, the hub around which all of our lives revolved. Sitting on the floor as Nona entertained family and community members at her endless afternoon cave`s, I was indoctrinated into a special society, one in which vivacious connection infused earnest and sincere relationships. The women would sit around and echar lashon, chatting animatedly with each other for hours on end. Language peppered with Ladino sayings and punctuated by uproarious laughter filled my ears while heavy, ethnic foods reminiscent of the old countries of Rhodes and Turkey filled my stomach. This robust umbilical tie to the old country developed in a sensorial and visceral rather than explicit way that grounded our family, providing a sense of belongingness and safety that pervaded my early cultural identity. For us, family was everything; and being in our family was inextricably connected to what it meant to be a part of a vibrant Sephardic tradition.

This aspect of my identity gradually became more complicated as the field of my experience inevitably widened to include the more dominant traditionally Ashkenazic conventions and practice. What had once been an implicit and unacknowledged understanding of Sephardic identity slowly became explicit as frank comparisons and contradictions brought my experiential world into the more broad-ranging Jewish arena. Mine was a naive understanding of Jewish identity, lacking direct consideration and focal attention. When a child is raised in a particular culture, she goes through an unconscious process called enculturation; this is the means through which a person passively takes in the values and behaviors that are suitable and necessary in that culture. Developing a more extensive and complex appreciation of one's culture means reevaluating the basic values inscribed in childhood, assessing their relevance and then making conscious choices about their personal meanings. This process, termed acculturation, is one in which a person of any age can adapt to another culture. People raised in diverse environments can compare cultures and consciously adopt characteristics that suit them. It can be based on personal preference, but it is more likely the social and environmental pressures that convince a person that the behavioral norms of one of the cultures work more smoothly or achieve goals more effectively in any given circumstances. Because of the human tendency to accommodate to one's milieu, identity can change and gradually evolve, to become an authentic reflection of an individual sense of self within a shifting multicultural context.

Of course, this process requires cognitive capacities that develop over a lifetime. As children, we are capable only of simple psychological operations, conflicts around identity generally give rise to black and white, all-or-nothing thinking. In this uncompromising manner of reasoning, differentiation is experienced as a danger; this threat can generally be dealt with by denying difference through merger and denial of particularities, or alternatively, by flaunting the superiority of one's own culture, in a chauvinistic denial of the validity of the other. These stances comprise opposite sides of the same coin, in that they involve holding on to rigid, categorical assumptions about the need for strict coherence within groups.

In every society in which diverse cultures meet, minorities face strong pressures to give up aspects of their identities to conform to the more dominant standards. Those of us who live in the United States and other Western countries have all experienced the pull of assimilation and the ways we are passively induced to forgo difference in favor of blending in with the larger group. Aside from other influences, our history as subjugated minorities has prompted us to integrate with more powerful cultures in acts of adaptive identification. The permeable boundaries between Jews of different backgrounds frequently leads Sephardic Jews to conform to the more prominent Ashkenazic group,

though in its extreme form, this adaptation can mean giving up meaningful aspects of self. It is often easier to fit in than to assert divergence or cultural distinction.

On the other extreme is the culture that is intolerant of others. Sephardic Jews can at times experience anxiety about the loss of their tradition, especially as more time and more generations widen the gulf between current conventions and the customs of the old countries. Though this is a valid concern, in its extreme it can lead to defensive rejection of otherness. In this case, difference is experienced as a threat to cultural identity and thus can lead to a xenophobic posturing, shutting others out through attitudes of self-protective fanaticism.

These strong reactions to alterity are more common than one might think and represent the Scylla and Charbidis of diverse, multidimensional societies. It is human nature to think in extremes and we all fall into these traps of oversimplified lines of thought at various times in our lives. These inflexible positions allow us the comfort of avoiding conflict, both internally and externally. Denial of difference short circuits nuanced understandings of human relationships and diminishes experiences of self-identity. Acknowledging contrasts means facing discord and possible friction within our environments. However, this conflict is the source of much cognitive and emotional growth. As our experiential spheres expand into wider and more diverse concentric circles, our inner worlds become more complicated. Enriched by new perspectives, our understanding of ourselves and of others deepens, creating opportunities for a broader range of choices and more fertile interrelatedness.

As a child I found myself confusedly oscillating between these two extremes. At home I heard about the importance of Sephardic culture and the need to assert a strong Sephardic identity. This position directly contrasted with the mentality I faced in my predominately Ashkenazic school in which the Eastern European traditions were assumed as a baseline of commonality among students and teachers. It was not uncommon during my elementary school years to bring some information learned at school home only to find that it did not correspond with my family's traditions as Sephardic Jews. Alternatively, highlighting the differences in my background from those of my Ashkenazic peers and mentors at school often brought uncomfortable feelings of difference; teachers with heavy workloads and packed curricula do not always welcome interruptions regarding individual differences in students' customs. Through dealing with the tensions between these environments, I began to establish a patterned response to the contexts in which I found myself. I learned to accommodate differences in perspective and when to assert my cultural particularities and when to remain more unobtrusive.

As this happened, I gradually established a relationship to my identity as a Jew that incorporated some Sephardic and some Ashkenazic traits, though because of my perception of Sephardim as a

marginalized community, I tended to hold on more tightly to the unique experiences of my Sephardic upbringing, asserting their validity in the face of what felt like a threat to their legitimacy. Mine was a somewhat militant outlook, particularly in my youth when I was unable to conceptualize the feelings of conflict surrounding my identity.

As I grew older and was better able to formulate and communicate some ideas about my experience of difference within these cultures, my viewpoint softened. I heard from others, both from inside and outside of my community and began to integrate a more balanced understanding of the nature of one's relationship to her individual heritage. Through this dialogue, I realized that having access to both Sephardic and Ashkenazic cultural identities could widen my frame of reference and enhance my religious life; I developed a more balanced bicultural Jewish identity, feeling freer to express myself and more open to input from others. As I learned that we can acknowledge differences and survive, I slowly gained confidence in the legitimacy of my unique background and this confidence allowed me to better hear outside perspectives without feeling threatened.

However, this balance was context-dependent and evolved as my sensibilities and attitudes towards myself and my surroundings fluctuated. In more recent years, the ties to my early upbringing slowly began to fade. My Nona and Papoo passed away and with the loss of their presence in my life, it was more difficult to sustain my connection to the experiences of my youth, inextricably tied to my experiences of myself as a Sephardic Jew. With their deaths I began to question the need to hold on to what felt like a dying tradition. I no longer lived in the Sephardic community I grew up in, and without the connection to that community it became more difficult to hold on to a culture with less direct reinforcement in my life. I began to think of the Sephardic community of my youth as a fading culture and Ladino as a dead language. I began to question the strength of my allegiance to my Sephardic background and my motives for asserting this aspect of my Jewish identity.

These changes in my experiences and perceptions of Sephardic Jewish identity, in conjunction with my desire to protect my own children from facing similar conflicts in their senses of who they are as Jews, led me to gradually give up some of my commitment to the singularity and uniqueness of my early Jewish background. It is my belief that my discordant experiences during my trip to Girona were the culmination of this protracted and somewhat unconscious disavowal of my Sephardic heritage, the return of which faced me with a shocking crisis in identity.

But this does not have to be the end of the story. The flood of feelings I experienced during my trip to Spain made me aware of a part of myself, a part that I truly value and that I had been denying for some time. It is inevitable that we fall into one extreme or another at various phases of our lives. This is

part of what it means to live within two cultures. But we can use these opportunities to develop an integrated understanding that is personally meaningful. My experiences in Spain helped me to better clarify exactly how I feel being a Sephardic Jew at this point in my life--a feeling that, until that time, had remained much out of my awareness. As a child, I took these things for granted, as essential parts of myself, not realizing the ways we are subject to change. Though there is some loss in giving up this childish purity of understanding, what we get in return is a far richer, multifaceted, and multidimensional connection to our Jewish heritage.

My Sephardic identity still plays an important role in my life. While I am concerned about its future in the face of assimilation to Ashkenazic standards, as well as the normative values of American culture, this concern need not lead to a regressive pull towards the creation of rigid boundaries. I believe that the meaning lies in the process, the journey towards achieving a balanced perspective that is reflective of personal significance. What we pass on to our children are not only concrete traditions and teachings, but also the ways we relate to our religious identities. As our children see us grapple with creating balanced religious and cultural selves, they can identify not only with our specific heritage but also with our struggle to remain true to ourselves while respecting difference in others. Though there is a risk that the minority within the minority which constitutes Sephardic cultural identity will become watered down with such an outlook, I have faith that our children will be able to forge their own relationships to religion, striking their own balanced relationships as Jews. Having an open point of view does not mean forsaking your roots; we don’t need to give them up, but can continue to take pride in our traditions while respecting those of others in the true spirit of loving thy neighbor.