Reflections on Sephardic Education

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Sephardic and other non-Ashkenazic traditions should be better represented in Jewish Day Schools and high schools.

Through forced diaspora or voluntary migration, Hashem allowed the Jewish People to spread to different parts of the world. Affected by their different experiences and influenced by the cultures around them, different customs and traditions developed. Provided that these customs and traditions are based upon and rooted in the common Written and Oral Law,[i] they are all valid and valuable expressions of faith, dedication to Torah and to the Jewish People. Judaism is like a jigsaw puzzle; one picture is composed of many pieces. If any of the pieces are missing, the picture is incomplete.

We have an amazing system of Jewish Day Schools, high schools, and yeshivot. They provide our children with solid Jewish and secular education and strengthen the Jewish People, now and for the future. I was fortunate to have attended a Jewish Day School and high school from the 3rd through 12th grade. My children attended similar schools from nursery school through 12th grade and then spent a year in yeshiva or seminary in Israel before attending university and graduate schools. For all of us the experience was formative. It helped us develop into the people that we are today. I am grateful. We are blessed to live in a time and place where we have such institutions. Nonetheless, the experience was incomplete. Pieces of the jigsaw puzzle were missing or faded.

I grew up in a home with two Sephardic parents, fortunate to be around all four of my grandparents who immigrated to the United States from Turkey and Greece in the early 1900s. We

attended Sephardic *kehillot*. My family was traditional and became more observant, in large part due to the education that my brother and I received in our Jewish Day School. However, as wonderful as it was, the school did a mediocre job at best of teaching us and the other Sephardic students about our customs. Our teachers, who were dedicated and wonderful in many ways, were benignly ignorant. For the most part, the Ashkenazic view of Judaism was what they knew and thought of as "normal"—and that is what they taught. I was proud of my background and knew that it was different. But, how was it different? How different was it? Why was it different? How was it the same? Occasionally, my teachers would turn to me or to the other Sephardic students to ask us some of these questions. Although teachers learn from their students, they wouldn't ask my Ashkenazic friends the same questions; they didn't need to. Plus, I didn't usually have the answers.

As an example of the flaw in the system and the void in my education, one year, in elementary school, I learned the "laws" of preparation for Passover. I was motivated and concerned that my family should be careful to do everything right. So, before the holiday, when I was home with my grandmother, Elvira Amir, and my parents were at work, I set about to diligently make sure that our house was ready for the holiday. Grandma Amir was born in a traditional home in Salonika. Her father died when she was young. After a devastating fire in the city, her family moved to New York while she was still of school age. She attended public school during the day and again at night with her older sisters. Though rooted in tradition, over time, through assimilation (and the lack of schools like those that my children and I were privileged to attend) the family became less observant. While I was busy preparing, my grandmother looked at me and said "Marc,[ii] that's not what *we* do for Pesah." I assumed that she had lost the tradition and was uninformed about the matter, so I kept going. "Don't worry, Grandma. This is what we should do. I'll take care of it." Only after my grandmother passed away, when I was an adult and had learned more, did I understand that Grandma was right and that, according to *our* tradition, I (and my teachers) were wrong. How unfortunate that was.

When I became a parent and our children started school, my wife and I, together with other Sephardic parents who, to one extent or another, had been through similar experiences, began to work with our schools to create greater awareness of this issue. Fortunately, some of the other parents had much better backgrounds than I did.[iii] We pushed for the inclusion of more religious, historical, and cultural information in the curriculum and for Sephardic *minyanim*. Part of the challenge was to create greater awareness in the community that the Sephardic experience is as normal and valuable as the Ashkenazic experience, not something exotic or out of the ordinary.[iv] After creating awareness, the other part of the challenge was to have the material to teach and the teachers who were interested, empowered, and capable of teaching it, including properly trained Sephardic rabbis and teachers. To some extent we were encouraged and supported by the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, Rabbis Marc and Hayyim Angel, and others like them. For this we are grateful. While we were doing this in our schools, other parents were doing the same in other schools and in other communities.

I think that our largest success was in creating acceptance of the concept that this material needed to be in the schools and awareness and understanding, among educators and other members of the community, that Sephardic customs and traditions are just as normal as Ashkenazic customs and traditions. Significantly, in high school, and to a lesser extent in elementary and middle school, Sephardic *minyanim* became common.

My children's Sephardic experience in Jewish Day School, high school, and yeshiva was better and richer than mine but it wasn't good enough. There is more to be accomplished. More needs to be done to educate our teachers, bring more properly trained Sephardic rabbis and teachers onto the faculty, enhance our curricula to incorporate more Sephardic traditions, halakha, worldview, culture, and history. Students need to hear references to and the wisdom of *hakhamim* and other impactful personalities from Sephardic and Mizrachi lands as much as they need to hear those from Ashkenaz and Eastern Europe. Doing so benefits Sephardic students and their families. Every bit as importantly, it benefits our Ashkenazic friends because it brings together all the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that is the Jewish People and creates a vibrant, complete, and united Judaism.

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Being a good teacher is demanding and time-consuming. Teachers have a limited amount of time spent face-to-face with students actually teaching. People usually do what is easy and familiar to them. Our teachers are no different. Unless they are particularly motivated, they will usually not venture out of their comfort zones to learn and then teach what is not familiar to them.

Building on the acceptance and awareness that has largely been achieved we need to find ways to interest our teachers in learning and teaching about the whole Jewish experience. It should be as easy as possible for them to do so. It could be helpful to provide curriculum material that the teachers can use side-by-side with their existing material so that it supplements, not supplants, what they are already teaching and to "teach the teachers" at in service workshops. The support of our administrators and lay leaders will be essential. Without their commitment the initiative will not be successful. As an important part of the schools' constituencies, Sephardic and non-Ashkenazic parents need to understand the initiative and express their support. Schools will be more motivated to make these changes if the demand for them is clear.

We also need more Sephardic rabbis and teachers in our schools. They need to be good teachers who are passionate and well-educated about their own backgrounds and the diversity within Judaism. They don't need to be clones of the teachers already in our schools. People know "the real deal" and respect and are attracted to genuineness. All of traditional Judaism is built upon the same foundations. These rabbis and teachers will be ambassadors to their students, colleagues, and communities. They need to be proud of the message they have to share and what they bring to the table. I've never met a Chabad emissary who wasn't very proud of the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe and ready to share those messages as part of a diverse, comprehensive Judaism. If Sephardic rabbis and teachers had half as much zeal about sharing the wisdom of the sages from their own backgrounds this effort would advance by leaps and bounds.

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Not too many generations ago meeting and marrying someone who lived in a city 30 miles away would be difficult and uncommon. Today, modern travel and technology allow us to interact personally and virtually with people in communities around the world. In some ways parochialism is a thing of the past and all of us are more familiar with people of different backgrounds than we would have been 100 or 150 years ago. At the same time, people are proud of their own backgrounds and comfortable with what is familiar.

In nature, diversity can make systems stronger. In modern society, forces at both extremes of the political spectrum often use diversity as a tool to drive wedges between people, pulling society apart, instead of unifying people with an appreciation for each other, making society stronger.

Through migration and diaspora, the Jewish People developed different customs and worldviews. We learn that there are *shivim panim laTorah*, 70 faces or angles to the Torah. If they are based upon a valid source, even if interpreted or expressed slightly differently, then each of these traditions and approaches to authentic Judaism honors Hashem and strengthens the entirety of the Jewish People.

I believe that diversity is good and that it can be a unifying force, not a divisive one. The Jewish People are richer, stronger, and more vibrant when all our traditions flourish, are appreciated and at play. Modern technology has made the world smaller. People mix and interact more easily. This will probably cause dilution or fluidity of some traditions. At the same time, it could draw people closer, causing us all to understand and celebrate our differences, unifying people, and making Judaism stronger. Although I don't know what the future will bring, I hope that 100 years from now this is where we will

[i] For Ethiopians and other communities whose exile may have begun before the destruction of the first or second Temple in Jerusalem in 586 bce and 70 ce, respectively, their practice of or the extent and manner of their incorporation of the Oral Law maybe different than for Sephardic, Mizrachi, or Ashkenazic communities.

[ii] She might actually have said "*mi hijo*" or "Pasha."

[iii] Usually because they were from families of Sephardic rabbis and/or because their families were more recent immigrants to the United States.

[iv] Another Grandma Amir story: In Thrifty Supermarket in Miami Beach in the early 1970s, a woman turned to her and said something in Yiddish. Grandma told the woman that she didn't understand Yiddish. The woman's sad, dismissive reply was "You don't speak Yiddish? You're not Jewish." Apparently, this uninformed person didn't try Ladino, Spanish, or French, all of which would have brought a ready reply.

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