Sephardic Reflections: Present and Future Tense

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Do you feel that Sephardic and other non-Ashkenazic traditions (halakhot, customs, prayer, history, religious worldview, etc.) should be better represented in Jewish Day Schools and high schools?

I firmly believe that the ideal curriculum in any Jewish Day School or high school is one that reflects the complete picture of Jewish traditions, customs, prayers, history and philosophy—Sephardic and Ashkenazic. It's not about "representation" or "inclusion," nor is it about "Sephardic Heritage Week" or "Electives for Sephardic Students." It's about every school offering every single student—Sephardic and Ashkenazic together—a daily curriculum that studies both of these beautiful traditions equally, thus exposing the entire student body to the multiplicity of religious books, customs, rabbis, and philosophies that both traditions have to offer. Adopting such an approach would produce better educated and more well-rounded Jewish students who would graduate our schools with a deeper and more complete understanding of the historical experiences, practices, and ideas of the entire Jewish people. Schools are in the business of educating, and as educators, it's our responsibility to present our students with a complete picture of their collective history and traditions. If we really believe in slogans like "Jewish Unity" and "*Am Echad*" (One People), then that starts in the classroom.

Do you have specific suggestions to increase the wholeness and inclusiveness of Jewish education?

Building on my answer to the first question, I will offer a sampling of specific suggestions in select areas that I feel can create the complete curriculum that reflects both Sephardic and Ashkenazic traditions.

Halakha: People often ask me "Rabbi, what's the best available book that includes both the Sephardic and Ashkenazic halakhic rulings?" My answer: The *Shulhan Arukh.* On every page of Judaism's most authoritative halakhic code, you have the rulings of two of Judaism's greatest masters of halakha: the Sephardic Rav Yosef Karo and the Ashkenazic Rav Moshe Isserles. This should serve as a model for

how we teach our students halakha. If we can open the *Shulhan Arukh* and see both traditions printed before us on every page, then when we study other works of halakha, such as contemporary responsa, we can teach our students Rav Benzion Uziel's *Mishpetei Uziel* and Rav Ovadia Yosef's *Yehaveh Da'at*—both Sephardic—alongside Rav Eliezer Waldenberg's *Tzitz Eliezer* and Rav Moshe Feinstein's *Iggerot Moshe*—both Ashkenazic. How wonderful it would be to see all of our students, regardless of their family backgrounds, conversant in the multiplicity of halakhic opinions and traditions.

Customs: It's very tricky for schools to teach customs—*minhagim*—because customs often reflect what individual families do at home. It's a myth to talk about "Ashkenazic Customs" vs. "Sephardic Customs," because within each of these traditions there are multiple customs that reflect different countries of origin or family traditions. Customs are best learned by practicing them at home. Having said that, I recognize that not every student comes from a home where customs and traditions are observed, so what is the best approach to teaching this multicultural aspect of Judaism? By making sure to create a curriculum that exposes all students to the large tapestry of customs of the Jewish people. Again, this is not about "inclusion" or "Sephardic Heritage Week," nor should this ever be presented as what's "normative" vs. what's "different." Sephardic and Ashkenazic traditions should have an equal seat at the classroom table, all year round.

Prayer: So often in my life, I've heard Ashkenazic Jews say they cannot follow a Sephardic service, and the same with Sephardic Jews in an Ashkenazic service. What surprises them is that when you actually compare the text of the Siddur and find that 90–95 percent of the order and words are identical. Students should have a *tefillah* class where they learn both *siddurim* and see the actual differences. This would not even take a year to learn. The bigger question and challenge is not in the classroom, but in actual prayer services. Will the daily services be Sephardic or Ashkenazic? I know this sounds bold and definitely out of the box, but the daily service can and should be both. I don't love the idea of schools that take pride in saying, "We also offer a Sephardic *minyan* for our Sephardic students." I believe in what Rabbi Uziel taught, that Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews should unite as one in prayer. We can easily teach our students a variety of Ashkenazic and Sephardic tunes. How inspirational it would be to see a morning *minyan* of students that blend the beautiful melodies of both traditions, switches between one tradition and the other with Torah reading *te'amim* (tropes) every Monday and Thursday, and sings Hallel on Rosh Hodesh with both tunes. Talk about a model of Jewish unity.

History: If we are to teach "Jewish history" in our schools, then it cannot be an exclusively Eurocentric-Ashkenazic narrative, and once a year we invite "an expert in Sephardic history" to teach a few sessions. That practice must go away, as it is intellectually dishonest. The medieval and modern Jewish historical experiences must be taught in their entirety. What about the Holocaust? Again, students must be taught the complete picture, the one that comprises the history and stories of the persecution, discrimination and tragedies that befell the Jews of Europe, the Balkans, and North Africa. The Holocaust is neither Ashkenazic or Sephardic. It was directed at all Jews, and that's how it should be taught.

Philosophy: I picture a Jewish philosophy class where the guest lecturers are Rambam, the Vilna Gaon, Rav Yehuda Halevy, Rav Kook, Rav Soloveitchik, Rav Uziel, Hassidic Rebbes, and Sephardic Kabbalists. No tradition has a monopoly on Jewish thinkers, and we will produce better students if they are exposed to the full gamut of Jewish philosophy and thought. All of these imaginary guest speakers, and many others, left us a treasure chest of ideas on how to think about God, science, human nature, prayer, and our deep connection to Israel. These thinkers were not expressing "Sephardic ideas" or "Ashkenazic ideas." They all equally belong to every single Jew, and therefore every single Jewish student should hear what each one of these thinkers has to say.

3. What resources would you suggest for rabbis and educators to give them an entry to Sephardic tradition in a way they can incorporate these materials into their synagogues and classrooms?

There are so many new books coming out every year that explain the customs, history, prayers, and traditions of Sephardic Judaism. The challenge is teaching rabbis and educators how to make use of these books in their respective settings. The best "resources" I have seen are the educator's conferences that have been convened in the past few years, conferences whose purpose is to teach educators and rabbis how to incorporate Sephardic materials in their classrooms.

I was privileged to have my organization, the Sephardic Educational Center, partner with The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, in what we called "The Sephardic Initiative." Our main goal was to convene conferences for Jewish Day School and high school educators, and "teach them how to teach" Sephardic Judaism to their students. We ran several such conferences, both on the East Coast and West Coast, and we succeeded in reaching a large and diverse number of educators, empowering them with books, curricular materials, and methods on how to best bring all of this into their classrooms. I hope we will do many more such programs.

I am also an annual lecturer in the "Journey to the Mizrach" conferences convened by JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa). They are a Sephardic-Mizrahi organization based in Northern California, and their conferences reached many Jewish educators from that region. The goal is the same as the "Sephardic Initiative"—empowering educators with Sephardic knowledge and materials. Speaking of Sephardic materials, JIMENA is undertaking the task to author a full Sephardic-Mizrahi curriculum. They have reached out to a wide range of rabbis, scholars, and educators, and I trust the final product will serve as a tremendous primary Sephardic resource for Jewish schools.

One of the main challenges is that many of the writings of Sephardic rabbis from the past 200 years are not accessible to the larger world, either because there are out of print, or because they are written in a Hebrew dialect that is challenging to the modern student. Until we have many works republished in attractively printed editions, and then translated into English (and other languages), I would suggest the "HeHacham Hayomi" (Daily Sage) website built and maintained by Kol Yisrael Haverim (The Israeli branch of the Alliance Israelite Universelle). This website—both in Hebrew and in English—offers a large database of the biographies and teachings of "Sephardic Sages" from all over the Sephardic diaspora. It's a wonderful resource and an easy way to bring the inspirational teachings of otherwise unknown Sephardic rabbis into the classroom.
https://www.hyomi.org.il/eng/default.asp

The Sephardic community must take the responsibility to initiate, support, and fund Sephardic conferences, publications, and curricular materials, making this wisdom available to the entire Jewish world. Such initiatives can help our present tense situation, where most Jewish schools run an "Ashkenormative" curriculum.

As to the "future tense," I still maintain that the blended and complete curriculum—not the resources for "including" Sephardic materials—is the ultimate ideal and goal.

4. Do you sense that inter-group ethnic discrimination is a growing problem, a diminishing problem, or no problem at all?

Keeping our focus on Jewish schools, I think it is definitely a diminishing problem. While we still have a long way to go in achieving the blended curriculum I laid out above, I think the Jewish Day Schools and high schools my kids attended fostered a much deeper feeling of "Jewish Unity" and "We Are One People" than the Jewish schools I attended. I want to keep things positive here, so I prefer not to cite the many instances of ethnic discrimination I experienced as a Sephardic Jew in my classes, from my rabbis and even at times from the administration. We've thankfully come a long way with all

of this, and I think that working towards the blended “Sephardic-Ashkenazic” curriculum will help remove any ethnic differences, because the school will be “both,” or rather, it will be “one.”

5. Do you think Jews 100 years from now will identify as Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Teimanim, etc., or will they simply see themselves as Jews with multiple ethnic backgrounds?

I don’t think we need to wait 100 years. My two children, whose father is Sephardic and mother is Ashkenazic, see themselves as “Jews with multiple ethnic backgrounds.” That holds true for many members of the younger generation that I deal with. This does not negate their “ethnic identity” or their desire to celebrate Judaism in a particularly Sephardic or Ashkenazic mode, but I think more and more are identifying as proud Jews who feel privileged to come from this or that—or multiple—backgrounds.

To cap off this question about the future, I will go back to 1911, when Rabbi Benzion Meir Hai Uziel delivered his inaugural address as *Haham Bashi*—Sephardic Chief Rabbi—of Tel Aviv-Jaffa:

> It is my tremendous desire to unify all of the divisions that the diaspora tore us into, the separate communities of Sephardim, Ashkenazim, Temanim (Yemenites), etc. This should not be a difficult task, for unity is in our nature and our national character as a people. These divisions amongst us are not natural. The particular linguistic and communal divisions that exist amongst us were created due to our dispersion throughout the diaspora. As we now return to our natural homeland, there is absolutely no reason to continue living by these communal and linguistic divisions imported from the diaspora. Instead, we will be one unified community.”

That was Rabbi Uziel—a Sephardic rabbi—delivering his unifying and visionary “I have a dream” speech.

One hundred and twelve years later, we have the opportunity to work toward unifying our Jewish communities and celebrating the beauty of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic Judaism.

For me, that challenge starts in the classroom.