Sephardim, Sephardism and Jewish Peoplehood

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Rabbi Marc D. Angel is Founder and Director of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

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My grandfather, Marco Romey, used to tell us of his experiences as a young Sephardic bachelor newly arrived from Turkey to Seattle. He and the few other young Sephardim had arrived during the first decade of the 20th century. They went to an existing Ashkenazic synagogue, assuming they would find welcome among fellow Jews; but instead of welcome, they were greeted with suspicion. Were they really Jews? They didn't have "Jewish" names; they didn't speak or understand Yiddish; they never heard of gefilte fish! Even when the Sephardim showed their prayer shawls and recited Hebrew prayers, the Ashkenazim were not convinced.

It took a generation or two for Ashkenazim and Sephardim to begin to re-connect after centuries of separation during the long diasporic exile. Until the late nineteenth and early twentieth

centuries the Ashkenazic world of Europe had little interaction with living Sephardim. And the Sephardic/pan-Sephardic world, concentrated for the most part in Muslim lands, lived in its own cultural bubble. The two communities developed along different historic lines; although sharing the same religion and peoplehood, they were, to a large extent, strangers to each other.

Sephardim: Preliminary Definitions

My grandparents were members of the Sephardic communities of Turkey and the Island of Rhodes. Those communities harked back to the Jews of medieval Spain (*Sepharad* in Hebrew), many of whom found haven in the Ottoman Empire following the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in the late fifteenth century. Their language was Judeo-Spanish. Their religious practices and customs followed the Sephardic traditions as codified by Rabbi Joseph Karo in his *Shulhan Arukh* and other great Sephardic halachic authorities. They prayed according to the classic Sephardic rite, including the kabbalistic texts that were incorporated over the centuries.

While most of the Sephardim lived in the lands of the Ottoman Empire, a smaller group settled in Western Europe and the Americas. These "Western Sephardim" were Jews or descendants of Jews who had been forcibly converted to Catholicism in Spain and Portugal, but who eventually were able to return to Judaism. They established communities in such places as Amsterdam, Paris, Bordeaux, Bayonne, London, Hamburg, and, beginning in the seventeenth century, in the Americas. The Western Sephardim were quick to adapt to the lands of their dispersion, and developed their own distinctive patterns of Jewish life.

Although the term "Sephardic" literally refers to Jews of medieval Spanish background, it has more generally come to include those communities that followed the patterns of Sephardim, e.g. halakhic practice, liturgical rituals, and religious customs. Thus, Jews of the Middle East and North Africa—even those not "Sephardic" genetically—have become part of the Sephardic world culturally. The late Dr. Henry Toledano referred to these communities as "pan-Sephardic." This article will be considering disruptions in the Sephardic/pan-Sephardic world as of the mid-nineteenth century and

will be using the term “Sephardic” to refer to the entire pan-Sephardic diaspora.

Disruption One: Confronting Modernity and Westernization

The Western Sephardic experience was unique among the Sephardic communities. Western Sephardim have been described as the first “modern” Jews, in that they generally flourished in relatively free societies. They valued general as well as Jewish religious education. They spoke the languages of the lands in which they lived. They advanced economically and professionally. Their synagogues were marked by a high sense of aesthetics and decorum.

The Western Sephardic communities were governed by rabbis and lay people who strove to maintain classic religious traditions. But as members became increasingly receptive to the freedoms of Western culture, individuals strayed from halakhic observance. The “establishment” had to deal with growing numbers of Jews who were lax in their observance, and others who left Judaism altogether. Notorious examples of defectors included Benedict Spinoza of seventeenth century Amsterdam and Benjamin Disraeli of nineteenth century London.

Western Sephardic leadership worked diligently to adapt religious traditionalism with the challenges of modernity. In seventeenth century Amsterdam, Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel published books in Spanish and Portuguese in order to provide religious guidance to newly returning *conversos*. Dr. Isaac Cardoso of eighteenth century Verona wrote powerful tracts defending Judaism from Christian attacks and misrepresentations. Grace Aguilar of nineteenth century London wrote important works stressing the spiritual qualities of Judaism, and refuting pervasive anti-Jewish stereotypes fostered by Christian society. Rabbi Eliyahu Benamozegh of nineteenth century Livorno wrote extensively on Jewish ethics, the universal messages of Judaism, and on spiritual foundations of Judaism. In twentieth century America, the Western Sephardic religious leadership included such figures as Rabbis Henry Pereira Mendes and David de Sola Pool of New York, and Sabato Morais of Philadelphia.

Yet, for a variety of reasons the Western Sephardic communities have diminished in numbers and influence. Over the centuries, many Western Sephardim became acculturated in their adopted societies. While the traditionalists succeeded in maintaining their communities for centuries, a gradual erosion in membership and commitment set in. The Sephardim, along with their fellow European Jews, suffered catastrophic losses during the Holocaust, and have been unable to regain their former vitality.

The Western Sephardic congregations in South America and the Caribbean declined due to assimilation, migration out of the region, and other factors. In North America, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogues of New York and Philadelphia continue to adhere to the Western Sephardic rite in prayer, but very few members are actually of Western Sephardic birth. The synagogue in Newport is basically an Ashkenazic congregation, and the synagogues in Charleston and Savannah have joined the Reform Movement. Overall, until the mid-nineteenth century, the Western Sephardic congregations were the mainstream of American Jewry, but they were eclipsed by Ashkenazic influences beginning in 1840 with the dramatic increase of immigration of Ashkenazic Jews. Thus, the Western Sephardim today form a miniscule percentage of Sephardic Jewry, and in spite of their many historic achievements, the disruptions of modernity and Westernization have reduced this group dramatically.

Sephardim in Muslim Lands

The Sephardic/pan-Sephardic communities of the Muslim world are not monolithic and each community has a history of its own. Until the mid-nineteenth century, most of these Jews lived in self-contained communities governed by traditional Jewish law. They were a tolerated minority sometimes enjoying relative freedom and prosperity, and sometimes suffering discrimination and poverty.

The forces of Westernization and modernization began to emerge in the mid-nineteenth century. The Ottoman Empire made a series of reforms, known as *Tanzimat*, between 1839 and 1876. These reforms aimed at adopting European style government and stimulating the economy. Jews in the Ottoman Empire gained new freedoms, and the educated and affluent classes were drawn to the

progressive policies. Although the masses of Jews lived within the traditional framework, cracks in the old system began to develop.

During the course of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was in the throes of decline, ceding much territory in the process. Greek independence brought significant changes for the Sephardim of Greece.

In the early twentieth century, with the rise of Kemal Ataturk, Turkey experienced a strong surge of nationalism. As the century progressed, the Jews of Turkey—along with other minorities—were drawn into the Turkification process, moving away from former traditional patterns that had characterized their communities for centuries.

In the 1860s, the Alliance Israelite Universelle[1] began a major educational endeavor that aimed to bring modern, French-style schools to communities throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Between 1862 and 1914, Alliance schools could be found in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. By 1900, Alliance Israelite Universelle was operating one hundred schools with a combined student population of 26,000. In 1912 the Alliance had seventy-one schools for boys and forty-four for girls, with schools in such places as Baghdad, Jerusalem, Tangiers, Istanbul, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, Salonika, and Rhodes.

The impact of these schools was significant. While the existing traditional schools were almost exclusively open to boys, the Alliance provided education to thousands of girls. While existing traditional schools focused heavily on teaching religious texts, the Alliance schools offered an expansive general education.

Parents who wanted their children to advance socially and economically were attracted to the opportunities that the Alliance schools offered.

The Alliance schools were met with mixed responses. Some strongly opposed them as a threat to traditional religious life. The emphasis on French language, literature and culture was seen as undermining Hebrew and religious Jewish studies. But for others, these schools offered a path for educational and economic progress. Graduates of the Alliance schools played increasing roles in transforming and modernizing their communities.

Some Alliance students went on to pursue advanced studies in Paris and elsewhere. Many had their eyes opened to the possibility of emigration where new opportunities beckoned. For the female students, the Alliance provided a framework for life beyond the role of wife, mother, and homemaker. Students were often taught by highly educated female teachers, who themselves served as role models. Subtly, and not so subtly, the patterns of traditional life were undergoing change.

The success of the Alliance schools led the existing traditional schools to upgrade their own educational program. In order to attract students, the communal schools began to offer classes in languages and general studies; they also improved their methods of teaching Hebrew and religious studies.

While the forces for Westernization and modernization were seeping into the Jewish communities of Muslim lands, larger external factors also came into play. Many of the lands in which these Jews lived were coming under the control and influence of European colonial powers. Egypt was under British control from 1882 until 1956. Sudan was a British colony from 1899 to 1956. Britain also was the Colonial power for Jordan, Palestine and gulf nations. French colonies included Tunisia (1881-1956), Algeria (1830-1963), Morocco (1912-1956), Syria (1918-1946), and Lebanon (1918-1943). Italy controlled Libya (1911-1951) and the Island of Rhodes (1911-1944).

Many of the Jews living in these lands identified with the European powers. They worked in their consulates; learned their languages; adopted their style of dress etc. To the often-downtrodden Jews, the European colonizers seemed to offer a higher culture with more opportunities for advancement. But as Jews “Europeanized,” they also tended to move further away from traditional religious observance. The rabbinic establishment which had governed the Jewish communities for centuries was gradually losing the adherence of modernizing Jews.

From the early twentieth century, migration of Sephardim from their native lands grew significantly. The spirit of change had taken hold. Many were drawn to the land of Israel. Many others were attracted to the United States. Some found their ways to Western Europe, the south of Africa, and cities of Latin America. The migration pattern was not only a result of the confrontation with modernity, but was also stimulated by the desire to escape the dire conditions in their homelands—poverty, natural disasters, and wars.

Reactions to the Disruptions of Modernity

Rabbinic leadership in the Sephardic/pan-Sephardic communities reflected different attitudes. The traditionalists—steeped in a kabbalistic/midrashic Judaism—felt deeply threatened by the Westernizing/modernizing influences. They sought to maintain the pre-modern ways of their communities. They were intellectually and emotionally unequipped to provide enlightened guidance to the growing numbers of Jews who were becoming alienated from the status quo and who were attracted to the freedoms and opportunities of modernity.

Albert Memmi, one of the great intellectual figures of twentieth century France, grew up in the Jewish ghetto in Tunis. After attending a French high school, he went on to Paris for advanced studies. He eventually sought to identify with the Tunisian national movement, but was rejected because he was a Jew. In his book, *The Liberation of the Jew*, he described his malaise: "When we graduated from the *lycee* in Tunis many of us decided to cut ourselves off from the past, the ghetto and our native land, to breathe fresh air and set off on the most beautiful of adventures. I no longer wanted to be that invalid called a Jew, mostly because I wanted to be a man; and because I wanted to join with all men to reconquer the humanity which was denied me."[2] Memmi, who died in 2020 at the age of 99, seemed never to have been able to make peace with his Jewishness.

Elias Canetti (1905-1976) was a Bulgarian-born Sephardic Jew of the Judeo-Spanish tradition. Yet his upbringing was far from traditional and his mother went so far as to feed him ham as a way of ridding him of past claims of Judaism. Through his various writings and teachings, he had a significant

impact on general intellectual life, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981, largely in recognition of his major work *Crowds and Power*.

Rene Cassin (1887-1976) was born into the Sephardic community in Bayonne, France, and grew up in Nice. He became a political activist and was co-author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights issued by the United Nations. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968. He identified strongly with the work of the Alliance Israelite Universelle and served as its President from 1943 to 1976. Yet his personal life was well removed from traditional religious belief and observance.

Memmi, Canetti, and Cassin represent a Sephardic intellectual class that contributed greatly to general society, but who removed themselves from the traditional life of Sephardic Judaism. With the rise of modernity, acculturated Sephardim advanced in many fields and in many lands; but in the process, many drifted away from traditional Jewish living.

The Sephardic rabbinic establishment could not hold back the forces of modernity and Westernization. But there were important religious leaders who responded creatively and intelligently to the new challenges, and who succeeded in maintaining tradition-based communities.[3] The rabbis of Morocco maintained close ties and held rabbinic conferences in which they dealt with the issues facing their communities. Rabbi Benzion Uziel (1880?1953) was the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1939 until his death in 1953. His extensive writings, including impressive volumes of responsa (*Mishp'tei Uziel*), had considerable influence throughout the Sephardic world and beyond.

Rabbi Uziel's religious worldview, characteristic of much of the Sephardic rabbinic community, was reflected in a letter he wrote to the leadership of the Alliance Israelite Universelle.[4] While recognizing the importance of students learning both religious subjects and general studies, he stressed the need to master Hebrew as well as the language of the land in which they lived and at least one European language. The goal of Jewish education should be clear: to raise children faithful to their people and to their Torah, people who would be useful to their families, their people, and society. Rabbi Uziel insisted that general subjects be taught by religious teachers. Otherwise, a spirit of

secularism would enter the children's hearts, leading them away from the very principles for which Jewish schools stood. If modern-day Jews thought that their children could achieve success only by receiving an exclusively secular education, they were in fact sacrificing their children's spiritual lives. There was no necessity to do so, since one could attain worldly success while remaining deeply steeped in Torah tradition.

Traditional Communal Framework

Religious leaders throughout the Sephardic Diaspora felt that the Jewish people could best be served by remaining faithful to its own distinctive way of life. To them, Reform was a surrender to the whims of European modernity, and it could only lead to a breakdown in Jewish religious life.

Whereas the issues of emancipation and enlightenment led to the formation of religious movements within Ashkenazic Jewry, Sephardic Jewry did not fragment itself into Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, or other movements. Ashkenazic Jewry was torn by feuding among the ideological movements. It established separate communities, institutions, even cemeteries. Sephardic Jewry was spared this internecine denominational struggle.

Certainly, not all Sephardic Jews adhered to the details of traditional halakhah. Laxity in observance was growing. A lessening of reverence for rabbinic authority was apparent in many communities. Yet, the religious intellectuals, as well as the masses, were desirous of maintaining a traditional framework for their

communities. The Sephardim found a modus vivendi characterized by respect for tradition and tolerance for those whose observance of halakhah fell short. Whereas some individuals might not be personally observant, the synagogue and community structure were to operate according to halakhah.

Disruption Two: Confronting the Ashkenazim

The Sephardic/pan-Sephardic communities were learning to cope with the challenges of modernity and Westernization. They were dealing with the influences of the Alliance schools; the impact of the Colonial European powers; the changes in their educational system; the new opportunities for girls and women; the growing laxity in religious observance; and the alienation of some of the best and brightest intellectuals.

But the Jewish communities of the Muslim world were to undergo massive disruptions over which they had little or no control. Large-scale migration from these communities was evident from the early twentieth century. Thousands of young people were seeking new opportunities in the United States. Many others were attracted to the idealism of returning to the Jewish homeland. With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, vast numbers of Jews from North Africa and the Middle East migrated there—often driven from their homes by anti-Israel Muslim governments. Indeed, Jews of the Sephardic/pan-Sephardic world

came to be the majority of Jews in Israel. In 2021, there are very few Jews still living in the former communities in North Africa and the Middle East.

As Sephardim came into contact with the Ashkenazic-dominated communities in the United States, Israel and elsewhere, they now had to face a new set of disruptions. Among their problems was dealing with negative stereotypes prevalent in the Ashkenazic community.

When Sephardim were arriving in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century, they came to be labeled as Oriental Jews. Indeed, they themselves assumed this designation and some of their early organizations were the Federation of Oriental Jews, Oriental Hebrew Association, Oriental Israelite Fraternity and others. Moise Gadol, editor of the Ladino newspaper, *La America*, established the Oriental Bureau of HIAS in 1911.[5]

Why would the term “Oriental” be applied to Jews from Turkey, the Balkans, Greece and Syria? Apparently, it was to distinguish this group of Jews from the more cultured “Western” (also referred to as Occidental) Jews. After all, Western civilization was deemed to be the most advanced. The “Orientals” were eastern, backward, uncultured by Western standards. So Ashkenazim (and Western Sephardim, too) could separate themselves from the lower-status newcomers by applying a term that then had negative connotations.

A similar situation arose in Israel. Jews from Muslim lands were termed *edot hamizrach*, “eastern tribes.” It is as though normative Jews are simply Jews, i.e. Ashkenazim; but Sephardim/pan-Sephardim are broken into eastern compartments—interesting (and sometimes troublesome) Jewish exotica. The late Dr. Daniel Elazar noted the prejudicial use of the term. He pointed out that the Jews of North Africa should hardly be referred to as “easterners” when all of Morocco is farther west than London, and most of North Africa is farther west than Poland. The appellation is obviously not related to geography, but to “the mobilization of loaded terms to advance a convenient Ashkenazic myth in a situation where to be Western is often synonymous with being modern. And since virtually everyone wants to be modern, this myth gives the Ashkenazim a significant psychological advantage over the Sephardim.”[6]

I remember as a student at Yeshiva College in the early 1960s that an emissary from Israel addressed us about the need for us to make *aliyah*. He spoke with dread about the possibility of Israel being overtaken by the “*Mizrachim*” (eastern) immigrants from Arab lands. He urged Western *aliyah* in order to maintain Israel as a modern democracy. He verbalized a common fear/prejudice: the Sephardim/pan-Sephardim were not “us”; they were foreigners with low eastern culture. They could not be trusted to become Westernized, certainly not right away.

These anti-Sephardic notions were held in spite of the fact that many of the Sephardim spoke Spanish, French, Italian and other European languages; that

many had received "western" education in the schools of the Alliance Israelite Universelle and in the general schools run by the European Colonial powers in their lands; that many, even of the less educated and less affluent classes, had a rich religious and cultural heritage that had sustained their communities for centuries. Were the poorer and less educated Sephardim in worse conditions than the Ashkenazim of the shtetls of Eastern Europe?

The pervasive prejudice against the "Oriental" Jews, the "*edot hamizrach,* " was not always overt and conscious. It was not necessarily meant to be malicious. But, in fact, it served to undermine the status of Sephardic/pan-Sephardic Jews. The Jewish schools almost totally ignored the existence of Sephardim, their history, culture, traditions. At best, they would introduce a Sephardic song or describe a Sephardic food. Generally, Sephardic tradition was either ignored, misrepresented, or confined to the areas of folklore/music/food.

Sephardic rabbis in Israel were relegated to lower positions with lower pay than their Ashkenazic peers. Rabbi Haim David Halevy, late Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, was active in an association of Sephardic rabbis between 1953 and 1959, known as *Agudat haRabbanim haSephardiyim b'Yisrael*. The group fought for proper recognition by the Ashkenazic rabbinic establishment. In those days, Sephardic rabbis were not allowed to sign simple documents attesting that a person was married or single. While Ashkenazic rabbis were appointed as chief rabbis of cities and received commensurate compensation, Sephardic rabbis, for the most part, were only appointed as rabbis of communities (*rabbanei ha'eidah*)

and received lower salaries. Once the basic objectives of the Sephardic rabbinic group were achieved (by 1959), the group disbanded.

The frustrations of the Middle Eastern/North African immigrants were many. They were often settled in remote towns and villages. Many lived in *ma'abarot*, tent cities, until real housing could be found for them. Their children were not expected to attend academically advanced schools or universities. Their economic situation was problematic, since many positions in government and business were granted by *proteksia*, favoritism by those in power to people of their own backgrounds.

While the Sephardim did indeed make considerable progress in adapting to life in Israel, the underlying social and economic problems could not be ignored. In 1971, a group of Israeli-born Jews of North African and Middle Eastern backgrounds created the Black Panthers party. Its goal was to promote social justice for their communities and to combat their perception of widespread discrimination against them. They brought their concerns to public attention through demonstrations, media events, and political action.

Early in the 1970s, Soviet Jews began to arrive in Israel in large numbers. The Israeli government worked energetically to absorb these new immigrants who needed housing, jobs, social services, education for their children, etc. The North African and Middle Eastern Jews could not help but note the difference between how poorly they were treated in comparison with the Soviet immigrants. In spite

of general progress, frustration and discontent persisted.

Sensing an anti-Sephardic attitude among the Ashkenazic rabbinate, especially in Hareidi circles, Rabbi Ovadia Yosef spearheaded the establishment of the Shas political party in 1984. The goal was to assert Sephardic rights throughout Israel, and especially in the religious realm. Shas became a political power with the election of its party members to the Israeli Knesset. Shas expanded its network of schools and yeshivot, and won the support of many Sephardic/Middle Eastern voters—even those who were not themselves Hareidi in outlook or observance.

In the United States, Canada, Europe—where ever they settled in the diaspora-- North African and Middle Eastern Jews faced the usual challenges of immigrants; but they also faced problems in their relations with the existing Ashkenazic establishment. Their Jewishness was questioned; their “oriental” or “eastern” backgrounds were depreciated; their traditions were ignored or relegated to the domain of folklore. But within several generations, most of these Jews progressed professionally, economically and socially. As Sephardim and Ashkenazim grew more accustomed to each other—and married each other—the old alienations and stereotypes diminished.

The situation in Israel has also improved over the generations, especially given the advancement of Sephardim in all areas of Israeli life. Marriages between Sephardim and Ashkenazim have become much more common, and the merger

of cultures has become more prevalent especially in the non-Hareidi segment of the population. Yet, Jews of North African and Middle Eastern backgrounds still feel pangs of discrimination and negative stereotyping.

Sephardic immigrants, whether in Israel or the diaspora, had to deal with serious disruptions as a result of moving into new lands. Their former communal structures and religious patterns were dislocated and not fully or easily replicated in their new homes. The Jewish establishment operated on the assumption that normative Jews and Judaism were Ashkenazic, that Sephardim needed to "Ashkenazify" in order to become modern and acceptable. It was as though Sephardic history came to an end hundreds of years ago, and that nothing of real significance occurred among them for the past few centuries.

Whether in Israel or the diaspora, Sephardim had to deal with a sort of identity crisis. They no longer had the calm confidence of living in societies that accepted and valued them and their traditions. If their children attended Jewish schools, they were taught normative Ashkenazic Judaism. Their own rabbis—especially those of the new generations—were becoming "Ashkenazified." They adopted Ashkenazic practices and even dressed in the black hats and frock coats of the Ashkenazic rabbinic establishment.

In responding to the challenges, some Jews of North African and Middle Eastern background literally changed their names so as not to be identifiable as Sephardim. Others tried to blend into the Ashkenazic majority in whatever ways

they could. Sephardic yeshiva students and rabbis began to identify with the Hareidi Ashkenazic rabbinic leadership. Rabbi Ovadia Yosef was a strong voice on behalf of maintaining Sephardic halakhic teachings; yet, much of the Shas leadership dress and speak pretty much like Ashkenazic Hareidi rabbis.

Another trend has also emerged in which Sephardim fully accept their backgrounds and embrace an almost “tribal” devotion to the particular customs of their past communities. These Jews take pride in being loyal to the rites and practices of the Jews of Morocco, Syria, Turkey, Iraq, Yemen etc. Instead of backing away from these traditions, they proclaim them proudly and energetically.

Even the term “*mizrachim*” has been turned on its head by some of the more militantly Sephardic group. Instead of being a source of derision, being “eastern” has become a positive value in modern times. Eastern Jews can claim an indigenous connection to the land of Israel, even more than Jews of European background. With the growing intellectual trend toward multi-culturalism and diversity, the “*mizrachim*” are feeling a new sense of importance in the Jewish world, and especially in Israel. Being “Western” is not necessarily viewed as an asset.

Disruption Three: Confronting the Future

At present, the Sephardic/Ashkenazic rift is still evident, especially in Israel. The Jerusalem Post (August 15, 2021) reported that Miri Regev, a member of the Israeli Parliament for the Likud party, is seeking to become the party leader and to move on to become Prime Minister. Regev was born in the southern development town of Kiryat Gat to immigrants from Morocco, Felix and Marcelle Siboni. She declared that “the time has come to have a Sephardi Prime Minister and that the Likud rank and file must vote this time for someone who represents their class, their ethnicity and their agenda.” Regev, as well as the leadership of the Shas party, continue to stoke the ethnic pride of the Sephardim and position themselves as alternatives to the Ashkenazic establishment.

“Ethnic” politics is obviously still a factor in Israel. This is not only evident among Jews of North African and Middle Eastern descent, but also among others including Russian Jews and Anglo-Jews. In the short term—at least for another generation—ethnic divisions and divisiveness will flourish.

But will these ethnic divisions continue indefinitely? What will the terms Sephardic and Ashkenazic mean one hundred years from now? How many Jews will be “pure-blooded” Sephardim or Ashkenazim?

The Ashkenazic world, although still tending to emphasize Sephardic folk qualities, is also coming to appreciate Sephardic intellectual traditions, rabbinic teachings, and religious worldview. Scholars are increasingly researching and publishing articles and books, exploring the Sephardic experience in the lands of

North Africa and the Middle East.

Change is inevitable. Although we are not prophets, we can envision a Jewish world a century from now that has moved beyond ethnicity. Our great-great grandchildren will descend from Jews of many diasporic backgrounds. They will have a mixture of Sephardic/Ashkenazic genes (and other genetic components drawn from converts to Judaism, and from Jews who do not neatly fit into Sephardic/pan-Sephardic or Ashkenazic compartments). Aside from genetics, they will also be drawing on a wide range of intellectual and cultural traditions. Hopefully, they will draw on the best of all our traditions and live a happy, wholesome Jewish life free from ethnic strife.

I suspect that 100 years from now there will still be groups of tightly knit Hareidim and Hasidim. There may also be groups of ethno-centered Jews who tenaciously cling to particular traditions. But most Jews, whether in Israel or the diaspora, will be sharing in a more general Jewish culture that combines elements from many traditions.

The Sephardic/pan-Sephardic Jews of today need to identify and promote positive elements of their history and culture that are worthy to be transmitted to future generations. The day will surely come when all Jews—of whatever background—will come to view each other as “us”—as one people with a shared history and shared destiny. Instead of ethnic rivalries, prejudices and stereotypes, we will ultimately emerge as a “homogenized” Jewish people, proudly and happily

composed of many diverse elements.

(If I may dare to add, I think that not only will ethnic divisions become increasingly irrelevant, but the division of Jews into religious “streams” will also decline. A century from now, I don’t think it will be important for Jews to identify as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal or any other such sub-division. Rather, Jews will make their own free and independent decisions as to what to believe and observe, where and how to pray etc. We will still have a wide range of opinions and plenty of controversy—but it will be in the realm of personal choice rather than institutional rivalries.)

Thus, the third disruption of the Sephardic/pan-Sephardic world is actually a disruption for all Jewry. It is a disruption—or rather a transformation—brought about by the coming together of Jews of all backgrounds, by inter-group marriage, by growing understanding and appreciation of the history and cultures of each of our diverse communities.

Our goal as a Jewish People should be to draw on all the strengths of all our communities and to work toward a Jewish Peoplehood that is inclusive, diverse, strong and healthy.

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[1] See Andre Kaspi, ed., *Histoire de l'Alliance Israelite Universelle: De 1860 a Nos Jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010).

[2] Albert Memmi, *The Liberation of the Jew*, trans. Judy Hyun (New York: Orion Press, 1966), 22.

[3] Among this group were Rabbi Israel Moshe Hazan (1808?1963), born in Izmir, who served Sephardic communities in Rome, Corfu and Alexandria; Rabbi Yehuda Yaacov Nehama (1825?1899) of Salonika; Rabbi Yosef Hayyim (1835?1909) of Baghdad; Rabbi Eliyahu Hazzan (1846?1908) who served the communities of Tripoli and Alexandria; Rabbi Reuven Eliyahu Israel (1856?1932), last

Chief Rabbi of the Island of Rhodes.

[4] Uziel, *Mikhmanei Uziel,* Tel Aviv, 5699, p. 517

[5] Gadol later abandoned the term “Oriental” not only because he thought it was pejorative, but because he thought the public used the term specifically to relate to Asians.

[6]Daniel Elazar, *The Other Jews: The Sephardim Today* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 24.