Songs, Stories and Scholars: A New Look at Sephardic Culture

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The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals sponsored a conference at the University of Washington in Seattle, on Sunday October 19, 2014. The conference was co-sponsored by the Hillel of U of W; the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies; and the Rabbi Arthur A. Jacobovitz Institute. This is one of many programs the Institute sponsors on college campuses throughout North America.

Songs, Stories and Scholars:
A New Look at Sephardic Culture,
An Extraordinary One-Day Seminar

Hillel at the University of Washington
Sunday, Oct. 19, 2014, 10am-2pm

The program was attended by about forty people. They were University of Washington undergraduates and grad students, community members, members of the Ladineros and of Sephardic synagogues in Seward Park. Beverages and burekas were set out before 10, a gracious lunch buffet at noon. Hillel Director Rabbi Oren Hayon mc'd, opening with thanks and a description of the important work of the event's sponsor, the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, and the planning of the program by its director, Rabbi Marc Angel. Rabbi Hayon introduced the "teacher" at the start of each session, Session 1 at 10:30, "Tales of the Spanish Jews," Dr. Jane Mushabac; and Session 2 at 1pm, "Sephardic Community Then and Now," Dr. Devin Naar. The audience was highly attentive to the two presentations, and in the Q & A's after each, asked many questions that led to meaningful discussions.

Dr. Mushabac spoke of the appeal of ports and seacoasts for Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman Empire and the U.S. Calling up places like Marmara, Tekirdag,

Rhodes, Canakkale, New York and Seattle was part of her introduction to a reading of her 2005 short story, “Pasha: Ruminations of David Aroughetti.” She explained how she came to write a story in Ladino; described the Ottoman Empire’s deterioration by the early 1900s and the poverty of many Jews like her fictional character at that time; and defined the Turkish word “Pasha.” At the audience’s request, she read an excerpt of the story in her original Ladino, then performed the whole story in English. Afterward, she read her novella’s brief first episode, “Canakkale, 1911”—published in the Institute’s journal Conversations—about a Turkish Jewish character very different from the one in “Pasha.” The audience needed the full half hour afterwards for questions and reactions. They discussed Turkish Jewish machismo, women’s mix of subservience and boldness, the word pasha in all its ramifications, the draw of assimilation and falling away from religion, Jewish mores (a married Jewish woman in 1917 Harlem having an abortion), and idealized vs. realistic portraits of Jews. The audience was clearly moved by the reading. Several people opened by saying how powerful the story was, how they wanted to read more of the author’s work. A recent email said, “You touched my soul.” Dr. Naar said he found the story’s ending very powerful.

After lunch, Dr. Naar began his lecture with a discussion of what the audience felt “community” meant. Ten people offered their ideas such as common interests, traditions, a feeling of belonging and trust. Then he launched into a historical portrait of “community” in the 19th century Ottoman Empire, for instance in Salonika, and the sharp contrast between it and our communities today in the U.S. In Salonika, the “community” was a quasi-governmental entity sponsored by the Empire; every Jew was required to be a member, pay taxes to it, and follow regulations, at the same time enjoying a vast range of Jewish communal religious, cultural, and health and welfare organizations under its rubric. In the U.S. today, on the other hand, the only indication of being part of Jewish community is the entirely voluntary affiliation with a synagogue, which means, for instance, that in the year 2000 Seattle had 2700 self-identifying Sephardic households, but only 600 of them were affiliated with synagogues and thus, according to the American definition, part of the Jewish community. Dr. Naar’s detailed description of the Salonika Jewish community and the provocative contrast between then and now led to ponderings on what this difference means for the Jewish future and the maintenance of Sephardic and other Jewish traditions.

October 19’s exemplary program underscores the immense value of the Institute sponsoring events of this kind. The seminar provided rich intellectual, social, and emotional interactions that brought people of different Jewish and non-Jewish

backgrounds together. It made the hosting Jewish organization a hub for discussion of the values that all great religions share; and for Jewish participants it generated a profound feeling of connection to Jewish experience and continuity. Balancing the provocative tension of fiction with a focused historical analysis made for an unusually effective seminar.

At the end of the program, Rabbi Hayon gave each attendee a gift from the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, a copy of the journal Conversations, the Autumn 2014/5775 Issue 20, on Bridges Not Walls.