Conference of Sephardic Rabbis

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A remarkable conference of Sephardic rabbis was held in New York City on August 17-18, 2026. Approximately 150 rabbis and communal leaders from throughout the United States and six countries gathered to study together, share ideas, establish friendships for future networking. The program sessions were held at the UJA-Federation building in midtown Manhattan.

The co-chairs were Avi Garson of Habura and Ethan Marcus of the Sephardic Brotherhood of America. These young leaders spearheaded the organization and implementation of this historic conference. Our Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals served as one of the co-sponsors of the event.

The Monday night program, open to the public, was held at Congregation Shearith Israel and featured the keynote address by Rabbi Marc D. Angel. His address was followed by dinner and a concert of Sephardic hazzanim.

Rabbi Angel's address focused on what Sephardic life might look like in 50 or 100 years, in Israel and the Diaspora. Will "ethnicity" matter in the future, when so many Sephardim and Ashkenazim are marrying each other and when traditions will inevitably evolve? What are the qualities of Sephardic civilization that will be relevant to future generations, whatever their particular ethnic backgrounds may be. We hope to post a video of the address on our Institute's YouTube channel in the near future. Below are excerpts from Rabbi Angel's address.

People speak of preserving the Sephardic Heritage. I do not agree. You preserve fish, you preserve fruit, you preserve things that are dead. Something alive grows and evolves. We don't want to "preserve" a Sephardic Heritage; we want it to live; we want to draw on our past and bring it to life in new ways, to breath wisdom and spirituality that can continue to fill our lives and inspire our future generations.

The Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York traces itself back to 1654, the oldest Jewish congregation in North America. People admire our history, as do I. But when I look at our synagogue I don't only see the past I see a taste of the future of the Jewish People. We thrive as a synagogue in the Western Sephardic tradition, a tradition of formality, elegance, supreme reverence for God...but we are

not an "ethnic" congregation. When I served as rabbi (1969--2007) at least half of our congregation was composed of Ashkenazim. And most of the Sephardim were themselves either married to Ashkenazim or their children were married to Ashkenazim. In other words, our congregation flourished as a Sephardic congregation because it attracted those of various backgrounds who found the Western Sephardic traditions to be spiritually compelling to them. In three or four generations from now, there will be very few--if any--purely "ethnic" congregations. Rather, Jews of many backgrounds will be found within the Sephardic orbit. What will draw them to the Sephardic traditions? What are basic ingredients in Sephardic civilization that are relevant and meaningful to all thinking Jews, regardless of ethnicity. Actually, we have a lot of powerful traditions--intellectual, cultural, synagogal--that will attract a great many people. I like to speak of "Sephardism"--Sephardic civilization beyond ethnicity.

Tags

Sephardic Rabbinic Conference; Sephardic Civilization