Diasporic Reunions: Sephardi/Ashkenazi Tensions in Historical Perspective

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Dr. Aviva Ben-Ur is Associate Professor in the Department of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, where she teaches history. She is author of Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History (New York: New York University Press, 2009), and with Rachel Frankel, Remnant Stones: The Jewish Cemeteries of Suriname: Epitaphs, and Remnant Stones: The Jewish Cemeteries and Synagogues of Suriname: Essays, published by Hebrew Union College Press in 2009 and 2012, respectively. This article appears in issue 13 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Ethnic tensions among Jews are a transnational, diachronic phenomenon, amply documented by Jews as well as by outside observers. Tradition prescribes Jews to rescue other Jews from affliction, underscored by the halakhic concept of pidyon shvu'im (redemption of captives) and the talmudic dictum kol Israel arevim ze baZe, which teaches that every Jew is responsible for the other.[1] Yet, when the factor of physical remoteness between two communities was eliminated, these time-honored values frequently dissipated. As one eminent historian quipped, "ahavat Israel is inversely proportionate to distance." [2]

Scholars of the American Jewish experience have discussed such conflicts at length and have usually understood them as one defining feature of a particular historiographical period. During the so-called Sephardi era of American Jewish immigration (1654?1840), we are told, Sephardim lorded it over their Germanic coreligionists, sometimes refusing to marry them, while beginning in the 1880s Germanic Jews gave their Eastern European brethren the cold shoulder, labeling them "wild Russians" and "uncouth Asiatics," until all groups seamlessly mingled following restrictive quotas of the 1920s that largely barred further Jewish immigration.[3] But historians have not yet examined in comparative context

ethnic tensions among the world's Jewish communities, nor are they accustomed to applying sociological, psychological, or anthropological tools to deepen our understanding of these conflicts. This article, inspired by social scientific approaches, reveals two distinct clashes among Jewish ethnic groups that appear consistent across space and time: "ranked stratification," where issues of superiority and inferiority inform the discourse, and "co-ethnic recognition failure," where ethnic belonging is denied.

Both historians and sociologists recognize that ethnic belonging is constantly negotiated and that a group's self-ascribed definitions are contextual and transform through time. Particularly in the case of Jews, whose variegated ethnic and religious identities overlap and are exceedingly complex, an explanation of terminology is imperative. Our frame of reference begins in the late seventeenth century with two groups conventionally known as "Sephardim" and "Ashkenazim." In recent centuries, Ashkenazim have been understood to comprise two subgroups, both of whom ultimately trace their roots back to "Ashkenaz," the medieval Hebrew word for "Germany": Jews of Central European or Germanic origin, who spoke German or a western form of Yiddish, and Eastern European Jews, who typically spoke Yiddish or Slavic languages. Sephardim—from the medieval Hebrew word for "Spain"—are also divided into two subcategories, both of them of remote Iberian origin: Western Sephardim, who after their exile from the Peninsula settled in various lands in the West, including the Americas, and spoke Portuguese and Spanish; and Eastern Sephardim, Jews who settled in the Ottoman Empire (Turkey and the Balkans) and mainly spoke Ladino, a Jewish language that fused early modern Castilian with Turkish, Greek, Arabic, Aramaic, and French, and developed in the East after the exile from Iberia. A third group, much larger than both of these two Sephardi subgroups combined, are Jews native to Arab and Muslim lands with no Iberian origins, who largely spoke Arabic and Persian languages. Since World War I, these ancient communities, indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, have increasingly been subsumed under the category of "Sephardim," itself a process of diasporic Jewish reunion, as we shall see. However, for the sake of geographical and linguistic accuracy, this third group will be referred to in a separate category—for lack of a better term, as Mizrahim (the Hebrew term for "Easterners").

Brothers and Strangers

Ranked stratification among ethnic groups is perhaps inevitable. Psychologists have found that "individuals who identify strongly with a group will be particularly motivated to establish its positive distinctiveness vis-à-vis other groups." [4]

Phrased another way, intense ethnic identity often goes hand-in-hand with self-exaltation or disparagement of the other. The gulf separating Sephardi from Ashkenazi Jews was in part informed by a variety of ethnic superiority myths that traced the ancestry of the former group to King David and the Judean Kingdom, and more recently to the glories of “Golden Age Spain,” a period from roughly the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, when Jews in the Muslim Iberian Peninsula supposedly attained a high degree of socially integrated culture and learning without losing their religious allegiance. By contrast, Ashkenazim and other Jews seem to have not cultivated parallel ethnic superiority myths, although some individuals did tout lineage to great Jewish scholars or ancient mystical traditions. Historian David Nirenberg suggests that the Sephardi obsession with noble roots arose after the persecutions of 1391, when thousands of Iberian Jews were forcibly converted to Christianity, thereby blurring the distinctions between the peninsula’s ethno-religious communities. Claims to aristocratic lineage—reinforced by armorial bearings and often fabricated family trees—helped individuals and families distinguish themselves from Christian neophytes. [5] The absence of parallel nobility myths among Ashkenazim may help to explain why Sephardi hegemony continued in the Americas even after Ashkenazim became the numerically dominant Jewish population.

Demands of the “host society” that Jews adopt Westernization is a second factor that exacerbated intra-group tensions during the process of diasporic reunion. The east-west divide among Ashkenazim did not arise until the first half of the nineteenth century, when emerging nation states in Western and Central Europe, implementing programs of Emancipation, demanded that Jews wholly identify as French-, German-, or Englishmen by discarding their linguistic and sartorial distinctions and shrinking their Jewishness into nothing more than a religion, devoid of any sense of peoplehood or yearning for the Land of Israel. By the mid-nineteenth century, once the majority of urban, Central European Jews had left the “ghetto” and acquired middle class status, they re-identified as “German Jews” and labeled their unemancipated brethren as “Ostjuden” (Eastern Jews) or those of “Halb-Asien” (Half Asia) [6]. With the mass westward immigration of Eastern European Jews in the 1880s, these latter began to fully embody their two functions, as both threat and foil to German Jews.[7]

American Sephardi Jews, whose ancestors in Spain and Portugal had been forcibly converted to Christianity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and were thus fully conversant with Western society by the time they abandoned the Iberian Peninsula and reverted to Judaism, underwent similar embarrassment and redefinition during the mass influx of Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim from the

disintegrating Ottoman Empire beginning in the early 1900s. This encounter, most notably developed in the United States of America, brought into currency the dichotomous terms “Old” or “Western Sephardim” versus “New” or “Oriental Jews,” and eventually “Eastern Jews” or “Eastern Sephardim.” Both diasporic reunions—those among “Ashkenazi” Jews and those among “Sephardi” Jews—were informed by the “modernization of Jewish life and consciousness,”[8] perhaps better described as modern Westernization.

The approach of German Ashkenazi and Western Sephardi Jews toward their “Eastern” coreligionists was undeniably philanthropic. But this benevolence was deeply informed by a double-pronged goal: to “deflect from themselves political and popular opinion critical of immigration and the immigrant and to set a standard of conduct for the immigrants that would effectively neutralize nativist sentiment.” [9] Historian Steven Aschheim’s description of encounters between the two Ashkenazi groups in Central Europe also holds true for Western and Eastern Sephardim in America: they were at once “brothers and strangers.” [10]

We can locate some parallels to the Sephardi/Ashkenazi fissure in the Dutch American colonies. In Suriname, where Portuguese-speaking Jews had founded an autonomous Jewish community in the 1660s, friction arose after Ashkenazim began to immigrate in the late seventeenth century. Initially, they prayed alongside their Western Sephardi coreligionists and adopted their rituals and Hebrew pronunciation. Joint worship under Sephardi cultural and political hegemony had also been the norm in Recife, Brazil, where an open, largely Iberian-origin community openly professed Judaism from the 1630s until the fall of the Dutch colony to the Portuguese in 1654. [11] Recife’s community was too short-lived to experience the full ramifications of diasporic reunion. But in Suriname, once Ashkenazim had reached a critical mass in the 1710s, cracks in the blended community began to appear. Sephardi leaders designated a separate house of prayer for Ashkenazim, even as the latter remained under the legal jurisdiction of the Sephardi Jewish court. Continuing religious disagreements led Sephardi leaders in 1724 to petition the colonial governor for an official separation, which was formalized in 1734, resulting in the formation of an independent Ashkenazi court of Jewish law. [12] Anti-Ashkenazi animosity persisted for generations. Sephardim perceived German Jews as more assimilable than those of Polish origin to Portuguese Jewish culture, but both Central and Eastern European Jews were vulnerable to disparaging remarks. In the 1780s, Surinamese Sephardi leader David Cohen Nassy sneered at his coreligionists’ “ridiculous manners,” “superstitions,” and “bigotry,” which he thought were exacerbated by the influx of Polish Jews.[13] That these internecine prejudices

could prevail in a colony 90 percent of whose population was enslaved and of African origin speaks to both the insularity of the Jewish community from white Christian society and the power of intra-Jewish conflicts to override the ascriptive identity that would ultimately recast Sephardim and Ashkenazim as simply "Jews."

Over a century later, similar dilemmas developed in Britain's overseas colonies, where Jews of primarily Iraqi origin and Ashkenazim from various European lands relocated in the late nineteenth century. Arnold Wright, at the turn of the next century, noted that in Singapore there "was always a certain element of antipathy between the Ashkenasi and the Sephardi Jews which found expression more often in the first generation than in the second…The Baghdad Jews have two synagogues which they frequent, the German [or Ashkenasi] Jew keeping himself strictly apart and being as often as not rationalist." Memoirist Eze Nathan, who had himself grown up in the Singaporean Arabic-speaking community, found Wright's account "only slightly exaggerated." [14]

Rifts also developed in Australia, whose native-born Jewish community was less than half of one percent of the total population in the early 1900s. These Jews, primarily of Ashkenazi origins, had limited observance or knowledge of Jewish traditions, identified as Australians (or British subjects) of the Jewish faith, and saw themselves as part of Australian society in every realm except religion.[15] They actively opposed the immigration of 2,000 Eastern European refugees in the 1920s, balking at their Yiddish and strong Jewish observance. Like the nineteenth-century "German" Jews of America, Australian Jews feared their own status in broader society would fall. Their rabbis and secular Jewish leaders supported restrictive immigration, petitioning the government in the 1920s to stem the influx because, they claimed, it would pull the existing Jewish community into destitution. With the rise of Nazi power the following decade, the Australian Jewish community's German Jewish Relief Fund raised £50,000, even as they attempted to bar Jewish refugees from entering the country. The Australian Jewish Welfare Society, fearing an intensification of anti-Semitism locally, advocated that no more than six Jewish exiles enter on any ship, each group to be accompanied by an English teacher.[16] Nonetheless, it should be noted that Australia's acceptance of 15,000 German refugees over three years was relatively speaking the most generous policy of any nation.[17]

During the mid-twentieth century, a new subethnic group further diversified Australia's Jewish community. Its members, the majority of whom had been dislodged from their homes in India, Burma, Singapore, and Shanghai during

World War II, and shared distant Iraqi origins, founded The New South Wales Hebrew Association in 1953. [18] The selection of an ethnically vague name suggests not only uncertainty about collective self-definition, but also a reluctance to choose an identity associated with things “Oriental.”[19] Three years later, amidst internal dissension, the group re-launched itself as the “New South Wales Association of Sephardim.” A local Ashkenazi rabbi and advocate had urged them to do so since [sic]: “The fact is all of you are Sephardim and the Sephardim have a proud heritage.” [20] Anthropologist Myer Samra argues that the “imputation of Spanish genetic origins” served multiple purposes: the established Australian Jews were familiar with what a Sephardi (but not an Iraqi or Mizrahi) Jew was; it countered the inferiority of Oriental self- and ascribed-identity; and it facilitated Jewish immigration during the White Australia Policy, which barred non-whites, including initially most Mizrahim, from settling in the country.[21] By the mid-1980s, Myer observes, the “need to stress Spanishness” had declined in the Australian Jewish community, in part as a result of their acculturation to normative Jewish identity, in part due to the rescinding of the White Australia Policy in 1973. [22]

Australia is a particularly interesting case since the recency of internal Jewish friction allows us to examine the process of identity amalgamation and separation as it was taking place.[23] The striking parallels to the contemporaneous U.S. and Israeli Jewish communities confirm a worldwide trend beginning in World War I whereby Sephardi Jews (of Iberian origin) and Mizrahim (Jews native to Arab and Muslim lands) banded together with other non-Ashkenazi Jews under the “Sephardi” banner in order to achieve political power, visibility, and acceptance in the larger, normative Jewish community.[24] In the United States, a parallel decision was ultimately made to politically unite—under the “Sephardi” banner—all non-Ashkenazi Jews, who in the process were implicitly proffered Iberian ancestry, even when it had never existed, as in the case of Iranian, Ethiopian, or Bukharian Jews. [25]

As we have seen, similar dynamics of confrontation and re-definition were repeated whenever and wherever two disparate and sufficiently sizeable Jewish diasporic groups were brought together in the same locale after generations of no direct contact. Their initial differences included geographical origin and language, and consequent variations in cultural and religious background, profession, and formal education. Often, as in the case of native-born Jews and immigrants, class exacerbated these tensions. Each of these diasporic reunions was characterized by a reluctance or refusal to participate together in religious rites or communal matters, to intramarry, to identify as members of the same group, and in some

cases to support immigration, all of which coexisted with the impulse of philanthropy. Sometimes these group relations displayed an arc beginning with coexistence, culminating in formal separation, and ending with mingling as either the group boundaries blurred through acculturation and intramarriage or, as in the case of Suriname, when the colonial authorities brought a formal end to separatist practices.[26] In other cases, such as “Ashkenazi” versus “Sephardi/Mizrahi” relations in Australia and the United States, the impediments against a unified Jewish community have not yet been fully dissolved.

Co-Ethnic Recognition Failure: The Denial of Shared Identity

One overlooked aspect of intra-ethnic Jewish tensions in modern times, much more puzzling than any antipathy heretofore discussed, is co-ethnic recognition failure, one person’s denial of a group member’s common ethnicity. In contrast to the disparaging “we are Israelites, they are Jews” mantra of the German-Eastern European encounter,[27] or “we are Sephardim, they are Oriental Jews” [28] impulse in Western-Eastern Sephardi relations, the cause of this failure to include is genuine ignorance of Jewish cultural variation. Co-ethnic recognition failure is a category of “experience-distance,” intended for use by social analysts, in distinction to “native, folk or lay categories,” which are “categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors.” [29] Phrased bluntly, “co-ethnic recognition failure” is an awkward term that obscures to non-specialists its immediately identifiable meaning. Yet the concept of “failing to recognize” approximates the experience as retold by its targets, who recalled not “being taken for Jews,” and not being “believed to be Jews.” [30]

Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews, who are the principle targets of this phenomenon, have recorded their experiences in oral interviews, newspaper articles, and memoirs over the course of the twentieth century, and continue to do so. More recent targets are “Jews of Color,” who trace their non-Ashkenazi ancestry to conversion, inter- and intramarriage, or adoption. [31] Their testimonies suggest that many Ashkenazi Jews are “generally unaware of Jewish multiculturalism.”[32] As anthropologist Jack Glazier notes, co-ethnic recognition failure also underscores the parochial self-awareness of Jews who assumed that only “Yiddish and its associated cultural symbols defined Jewish identity.”[33]

One early example dates to the tenure of Mayor William Jay Gaynor (1909?1913), when a number of Ashkenazi Jews of the Lower East Side, protesting street disturbances and neighborhood disputes, petitioned him to remove the “Turks in our midst.” The main problem with the complaint was that these “Turks” were actually fellow Jews. Upon learning of their mistake, the Ashkenazim—primarily

Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern European origin—withdrew the petition, deciding to settle the matter “among themselves.”[34] Eastern Sephardi Jews, with their unfamiliar physiognomy, Mediterranean tongues, and distinct religious and social customs baffled their Ashkenazi brethren. One young Russian-born woman of New York City was both captivated and confused by Jack, a young man of uncertain ethno-religious identity she had met at a ball in 1916 organized by a Ladino newspaper. “At first glance,” Clara wrote, “I thought him Italian. The way he spoke, his countenance and his gestures were like those of the Italians. But later, when we began seeing each other, he swore to me that he is a Spanish-speaking Jew.” Clara’s parents objected to the union because they did not believe that Jack was indeed Jewish, forcing Clara to appeal to the newspaper editor to verify in print “if it is possible, that a Jew who doesn’t speak Jewish, and doesn’t look Jewish, can nevertheless have a Jewish soul.” [35]

This problem of co-ethnic recognition failure propelled Bulgarian-born Moise Gadol to launch the country’s first Ladino newspaper in 1910. The Eastern Sephardi newcomers Gadol first met when he arrived in New York described shared identity denial as their worst immigrant hardship.[36] With tears in their eyes, they related that when they presented themselves for employment, they were “not believed by the Ashkenazim to be Jews, except with very great efforts and with all sorts of explanations…”[37] Many Eastern Sephardi job seekers learned to arrive at Ashkenazi-owned establishments bearing copies of Gadol’s weekly La America in their hands, and were able to convince incredulous employers of their Jewish identity “by showing our newspaper with [its] Hebrew letters,” peppered with announcements from the Ashkenazi press. [38]

The multiple reports of this experience from a variety of sources—contemporaneous and reminiscent, Jewish and non-Jewish—make it clear that co-ethnic recognition failure was neither folkloric nor a case of social snobbery. Forged of genuine ignorance, it occurred in every place where Eastern Sephardim settled, including, aside from New York, Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, and Seattle.[39] Even without full and detailed cognizance of the multiple cases experienced across the country, Gadol was a good enough journalist to recognize that his weekly “would not suffice to recount one part of this sad situation.” [40]

Jews of Arab lands, whose mass immigration began after the rise of the State of Israel, also confronted this irksome phenomenon. Both Nitza Druyan and Dina Dahbany-Miraglia document that Ashkenazim often failed to recognize Yemenite Jews as coreligionists and coethnics.[41] This denial of shared ethno-religious

identity, however, carried with it a sharper racial sting. With their “dark skin” and “curly hair” (the terms are Dahbany’s), Yemenite Jews were frequently mistaken for gentile African Americans and resorted to strategies long familiar to the country’s black community. When seeking apartments in Jewish neighborhoods, Yemenite Jews would dispatch a lighter-skinned family member or friend in their stead. When soliciting employment, particularly before the 1960s, they sought “the mediation of a friend or a relative.” [42] Yemenite Jews, with no Judeo-Arabic newspaper they might present to incredulous Ashkenazim as proof of their Jewishness, were forced to employ tactics traditionally used by many African Americans and Hispanics in a racially discriminatory America. The denial by Ashkenazim of shared ethnicity with Eastern Sephardim (and more recently, with “Jews of Color”) reflects the racialist idea, which intensified in the nineteenth century, that one defining marker of Jewishness is phenotype. [43]

Sephardim and Mizrahim experienced the repercussions of co-ethnic recognition failure on many levels. On the one hand, as we have seen, the denial of shared ethnicity and religion was personally painful and frustrating to immigrants who had been born and raised as Jews, understood their Jewishness as a heritable—and thus inalienable—identity, and were now being mistaken for non-Jews. Psychological studies suggest that “individuals require connectedness and belonging with others in order to function optimally,” and that “rejection and exclusion from social relationships…can lead to anxiety, negative affect and depressed self-esteem,”[44] something Gadol seems to have fully understood. Ashkenazi rejection of Sephardim as potential marriage partners may have played a role in the high rates of intermarriage among first- and second-generation Eastern Sephardim. According to estimates, unions between Eastern Sephardim and non-Jews in Seattle during the 1930s and early 1970s were four and three times as common, respectively, as marriages between Sephardim and Ashkenazim. [45]

Another unintended consequence of co-ethnic identity failure was unintentionally passing for other ethnic groups. In 1914, David de Sola Pool, spiritual leader of New York’s Congregation Shearith Israel, remarked that many Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim had not been included in Jewish immigration statistics “because they have been passed as Turks or Greeks, not being easily recognizable as Jews, either in name, language or physical appearance.” [46] HIAS officials stationed at Ellis Island were qualified to deal with Eastern European Ashkenazim, but were not familiar with the languages or names of Mizrahi and Eastern Sephardi Jews. Thus, many or most of these Jews passed by Ashkenazi immigration officials unnoticed and did not receive the assistance to which they were entitled. [47]

Until Eastern Sephardim were appointed as volunteer interpreters at Ellis Island, many others slipped through HIAS's philanthropic cracks and were often turned back to their native lands.

Nevertheless, some Jewish immigrants embraced being passed over as an opportunity. As early as 1893, Eastern Sephardi Jews were asked to pose as indigenous (and implicitly Muslim) Middle Easterners at the Chicago World's Fair. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that roughly four-fifths of the "inhabitants of the Turkish village on the Midway Plaisance at the Chicago Exposition were Jews," from merchants, clerks and actors, to servants, musicians, and dancing girls. Only when the "Streets of Constantinople" came to a virtual standstill on Yom Kippur was the charade exposed as a public secret.[48] New York Sephardi leader Joseph Gedalecia, who had himself immigrated to the United States via Paris as "a Frenchman," noted in 1914 that many Jewish immigrants native to Greece and other Mediterranean countries intentionally passed as non-Jewish. [49] Reminiscing on Sephardi communal affairs from his Los Angeles home in 1976, Albert J. Amateau claimed he knew "fifty or more" Sephardim who "changed their names and pretended they were anything but Jews," one passing for a Christian Italo-Frenchman.[50] Many Eastern Sephardim allegedly succumbed to the temptation to "pass" for business reasons, Amateau alleged, including the multi-millionaire Schinasi brothers of New York tobacco factory fame. This, however, did not prevent them from later embracing the Sephardi community as prominent leaders and philanthropists. [51] This apparent relief at being excluded from or by a group highlights a recent finding that "social exclusion can sometimes be a positive experience." Eastern Sephardim who actively embraced or willingly accepted a variety of non-Jewish Mediterranean identities are paradigmatic of the "self-expansion model," whereby individuals seeking more benefits than their natal group provide and pursuing more desirable opportunities elsewhere, happily sever their ties.[52]

Co-ethnic recognition failure seems to have led some Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim to internalize the Ashkenazi image of them as non-Jews or "Turks." American-born Ben Cohen, whose family had immigrated from Monastir in 1910, confessed: "We used to speak about the Jewish guys, and the Sephardics were different. Really strange."[53] An elderly Eastern Sephardi of Indianapolis interviewed in the 1980s recalled being warmly greeted at a recent party by many "Sephardics" and "even Jewish people." [54] Eastern Sephardim in Los Angeles also tended to identify as "Sephardic" and to reject the term Jewish as a self-referential.[55] The Ladino term for Eastern European Ashkenazim, "Yiddishim" (composed of the word "Yiddish," a reference to both the language

and Jewishness, and appended to the Hebrew plural suffix[56]) reinforced the idea that Ashkenazim were the only authentic Jews. Syrian Jews were also complicit in reinforcing a model of “authentic” Jewishness. These immigrants referred to Eastern European Ashkenazim as “Jewish” or “Iddish.” A male Ashkenazi Jew was an “Iddshy,” while a female an “Iddshiyeh.” Syrian Jews referred (and still refer) to themselves as “S-Ys,” the first two letters of “Syrian,” and nicknamed Ashkenazi Jews (of any background) as “J.W.s” or “J-Dubs,” from the first and last letters of the word “Jew.”[57] New York’s Syrian Jews used these terms unabashedly, constructing a world trifurcated into “Syrians” (meaning Syrian Jews), “Jews” (Ashkenazim), and “Gentiles.”[58] These ethnic terms, like the use of Ladino and Arabic words and phrases in English speech, undoubtedly cultivated an “‘in-group’ spirit,” as Joseph Sutton suggests,[59] but reveal much more. If the established group was Jewish, what was the immigrant, minority group? The origin of these monikers within immigrant Jewish communities suggests that Eastern Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in a part of their psyches assigned “true” Jewish identity to Ashkenazim, with the implicit negation of their own authentic Jewish belonging. An extreme example is the case of Yemenite Jewish immigrants who arrived in the United States after World War II and sometimes called each other shvartze and shvartze khaye, the derogatory Yiddish expressions for “nigger” (literally, “black”) and “nigger beast” (literally, “black beast”), respectively, terms they heard from the mouths of their Ashkenazi contemporaries.[60] Here again a Jewish subgroup internalized the majority group’s parochial—and in this case racist—perception.

As with ranked stratification, co-ethnic recognition failure in Jewish immigrant communities appears to be a transnational phenomenon. In 1920s Argentina, when an Ashkenazi woman wed a Syrian Jew, her family “suspected that she was involved in an exogamic relationship. The groom’s knowledge of Hebrew prayers helped convince them that they were not giving their blessing to a “‘mixed’ marriage.’”[61] Ashkenazi denial of the Jewishness of Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim was among the longest-lived of immigrant memories, perhaps because it threatened the most crucial aspects of a newcomer’s adjustment: collective identity, livelihood, and love.

Yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that this failure to recognize group belonging was not exclusively a function of a hegemonic Ashkenazi majority interacting with an Eastern Sephardi or Mizrahi minority. Steven Aschheim found that during World War I, many Eastern European Jews were apparently unconvinced that German Jewish soldiers were fellow Jews.[62] José Estrugo, an Ottoman-born Sephardi who settled in Los Angeles in 1920, noted that Ashkenazim who

immigrated to the Anatolian Peninsula in early 1900s were not believed to be Jews, since they did not have “Spanish” names, nor did they speak “Spanish.” The matriarch of one prominent Sephardi family of Istanbul, whose granddaughter had fallen in love with an Ashkenazi merchant, objected to the union because, to her understanding, someone who did not speak Spanish could not be a Jew.[63] In the course of his fieldwork among Indianapolis Sephardim, Jack Glazier once observed a non-Jewish Spanish-speaker chatting with older Ladino-speaking congregants in the local Sephardi synagogue. One worshiper asked the visitor how she managed to speak such good Spanish, despite not being Jewish.[64] Acculturated European and American Ashkenazim who traveled to lands with majority Sephardi/Mizrahi populations in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were often taken for European-origin Christians, largely based on their dress. U.S.-born Semitic scholar Cyrus Adler, who visited Damascus in 1891, noted that one “old [Jewish] man wasn’t satisfied that I was a Jew simply from being able to speak Hebrew, so he made me recite the Shema.” [65] Nahum Slouschz (1872?1969), an Odessa-born writer and Hebrew literature specialist who was traveling in Libya, found that both the governor of Tripoli and a Turkish administrative officer assumed he was a European Christian accompanied by a Jewish dragoman. Hayyim Habshush, Slouschz’s hired translator, probably presumed the same. “It was no avail for me to explain that I was not a Rumi (Christian),” Slouschz recalled, “nobody would believe me.” [66] Slouschz was even more astonished by his reception by Jews on the island of Jerba: “I passed through the market unnoticed. I was evidently taken for some French Colonial, loafing through the town.” Only after he began to converse in Hebrew to an “old rabbi” did the local Jews realize his Jewish identity.[67]

The impulse to equate one’s own Jewish culture with normativity and even exclusivity seems to be a factor of membership in an overwhelming majority, or of insulation from the wider world and its ethno-linguistic complexity (or both). But more broadly, these encounters speak to what Aschheim calls “the problem of Jewish identity in the modern world,”[68] or perhaps better phrased, the consequences of westernization for modern Jewish diasporic relations. This crisis, as it effected Jews worldwide, brought into question the “nature and meaning of Jewish culture, commitment, and assimilation.”[69] It also raised questions about the non-Jewish groups Jews were “mistaken” for. Where did one boundary begin and the other end?

History Lessons: Ashkenazi/Sephardi Relations in Historical Perspective

Ranked stratification and co-ethnic recognition failure may be the most salient features of Ashkenazi/Sephardi conflicts in modern times. Yet, as this brief comparative survey suggests, these tensions are structural in nature, rather than culturally specific to any Jewish ethnic group. Social class, longevity in the land, ethnic superiority myths, fear that newcomers would cause status demotion, and the Westernizing demands of broader society seems to be the main factors that interfered with intramarriage, communal worship and cooperation, and support for unimpeded immigration. Cultural insulation and hegemony, on the other hand, determined the denial of shared ethno-religious belonging. Yet, ranked stratification and co-ethnic recognition failure were two sides of the same diasporic coin, an international currency that memorialized what happened “when diasporas met” in a Westernizing age.

Some would argue that intra-Jewish friction has been transient and minor when compared to ethno-religious solidarity, and that the frequency or severity of “prejudice” or “discrimination” in the Jewish community is exaggerated. This skepticism compels us to think about the nature of historical sources, what causes such sources to come into being, and what ensures their preservation. It is not an accident that nearly every documented case of co-ethnic recognition failure is told from the perspective of the person denied shared ethnicity, or that most complaints about “Ashkenazi racism” come from Eastern Sephardim, Mizrahim, or “Jews of Color,” for it is they who bore the consequences. Such an experience was memorable and meaningful for them because it imperiled employment opportunities, romantic or marital liaisons, participation in the Jewish community, and the psychological wellbeing that social inclusion can bring. The denier of shared identity, on the other hand, would have found the experience of little importance, and thus had few incentives to recall or document it. Good historiographical practice demands that we consider the experiences and memories of non-normative groups, even if the narratives of the mainstream do not echo them.

Another important incentive for downplaying intra-Jewish hostilities may be that they are embarrassing to lay members of the communities and to scholars of the American Jewish experience whose academic and Jewish identities overlap. Intra-ethnic conflicts—whether past or current—contradict the dominant themes of American Jewish history, and subvert a “Jewish ascent narrative” that begins with flight from persecution, continues on to immigration and hardship, and resolves in a unified, albeit acculturated, American Jewish community. This imagined progression has been popularized in the best known U.S. Jewish novels, memoirs, and films (if not in much of American Jewish historiography), and represents the

mainstream community's preferred mode of self-representation to the outside world.[70] But ignoring or deemphasizing internal conflict also means dismissing the power differentials between groups that erase or edit out marginal views from the historical transcript. It also means neglecting the multi-lingual immigrant documents (such as the Ladino press or interviews recorded in Spanish, Arabic, or Farsi) that centrally position immigrant hardships and exclusion from the broader Jewish community. Here again, the historical discipline demands that we consider neglected sources and how these may reshape our narrative of the American Jewish past.

The argument that intra-Jewish tensions were insignificant tacitly implies that a unified Jewish community has already been created via an American-style "mizug galuyyot," a Jewish melting pot of diasporic groups into one cohesive people.[71] Advocates of this ethical imperative seldom if ever acknowledge that the process of Jewish diasporic encounter and redefinition has always been closely informed by power differentials, with numerically dominant or hegemonic Jews shaping much of the discourse, arbitrating Jewish normativity, and dictating the cultural model. The risk for smaller or disempowered Jewish groups is always that Jewish unity will be achieved through the assimilation—in effect, disappearance—of their subcultures, rather than through the amalgamation or incorporation that "mizug galuyot" deceptively implies. No conversation about ahavat Israel within the framework of Jewish communal unity should ever take place without the awareness of the power dynamics we have examined in historical context. Similarly, no narrative of American Jewish history should ignore the process that dictates how we should remember the Jewish past, and what we should forget or ignore as "unimportant" or "unrepresentative."

The increasing ancestral diversity of the American Jewish community in recent years ensures us that these uncomfortable issues are not confined to the past.[72] It would be foolhardy to argue that Jews were and are somehow unaffected by received attitudes, or by the fears and racial ideas of their broader non-Jewish environments. No degree of Jewish religious or ideological conviction can ever overpower these influences. If Jews today were to view their intra-group relations less in religious terms, and more in historical terms, a new conversation could begin.

[1] On some of these issues see Babylonian Talmud, Shavuot 39a and Selwyn Ilan Troen and Benjamin Pinkus, Organizing Rescue: National Jewish Solidarity in the Modern Period (London, England: F. Cass, 1992). I thank my students Lily Brown and Tamara Chung-Constant for the social scientific insights they inspired while enrolled in my classes at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst during the fall

2010 and fall 2011 semesters.
[2] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932?2009) related this maxim in a graduate seminar on Jews in the Ottoman Empire, which I attended at Columbia University in the early 1990s. The Hebrew phrase may be roughly translated in this context as “love for one’s fellow Jews.”
[3] This view is best summarized by Jacob Rader Marcus, The Colonial American Jew, 1492?1776, 3 vols. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 2: 1000?1006.
[4] Christopher M. Federico and Shana Levin, “Intergroup Biases as a Function of Reflected Status Appraisals and Support for Legitimizing Ideologies: Evidence from the USA and Israel,” Social Justice Research 17: 1 (March 2004), 47?73; 52.
[5]David Nirenberg, “Mass Conversion and Genealogical Mentalities: Jews and Christians in Fifteenth-Century Spain,” Past and Present 174 (2002): 3?41.
[6]Steven E. Aschheim, Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800?1923 (Madison: University of Wisconsin: 1982), 3; 31.
[7] Ibid., 12.
[8] Ibid., 3.
[9] Jack Glazier, Dispersing the Ghetto: The Relocation of Jewish Immigrants Across America (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 9.
[10]Aschheim, Brothers and Strangers.
[11] Jonathan D. Sarna, American Judaism: A History (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 12.
[12] Wieke Vink, Creole Jews: Negotiating Community in Colonial Suriname (Leiden: KITLV, 2010), 196–197; Gemeentearchief Amsterdam (The Netherlands), Stukken betreffende gemeenten te Amsterdam, Curaçao, Suriname en Constantinopel, 1650–1798, no. 1029, “Extracte uijt het Register der Resolutien van de Ed. Agthb. Heeren directeuren van de Societeijt van Suriname,” January 6, 1734, 890–894.
[13]David Cohen Nassy, Essai Historique sur la Colonie de Surinam (Paramaribo, 1788;
reprinted Amsterdam: S. Emmering, 1968), part 1, 83 and 85.
[14]Eze Nathan, The History of Jews in Singapore, 1830?1945: A Personal Account by Eze Nathan (Singapore: Herbilu, 1986), 58. The square brackets in the quote are Nathan’s.
[15]Myer Samra, “Israel Rhammana: Constructions of Identity Among Iraqi Jews in Sydney, Australia,” Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney, 1987, 106?107.
[16] Ibid., 107?108.
[17] Ibid., 109.

[18] Aaron Aaron, The Sephardim of Australia and New Zealand (New South Wales, Australia: self-published, 1979), 55.
[19] Samra, “Israel Rhammana,” 267.
[20] Ibid., 268.
[21] Ibid., 314.
[22] Ibid., 317; A. C. Palfreeman, “Non-white Immigration to Australia,” Pacific Affairs 47: 3 (Autumn 1974), 344?357; 349.
[23] Samra, “Israel Rhammana,” 36.
[24] For the emergence of this trend during World War I see N.a., “Sefardíes,” in Eduardo Weinfeld and Isaac Babani, eds., Enciclopedia Judaica Castellana, 10 vols. (México: Editorial Enciclopedia Judaica Castellana, 1951): 9: 496?519; 496.
[25] Ben-Sion Behar, “Sefardím, Ma No Orientales,” La America (October 29, 1915): 2; http://www.americansephardifederation.org/about.html (last accessed 1/11/12).
[26] On the end of the practice in Suriname see Vink, Creole Jews, 202–204.
[27] Isaac Mayer Wise in The American Israelite (January 28, 1887): 4. The exact phrase, which actually alludes more to national origin than an east-west ethnic divide, is: “We are Israelites of the nineteenth century and a free country, and they gnaw the dead bones of past centuries…we let them be Jews and we are the American Israelites.”
[28] Joseph M. Papo, Sephardim in Twentieth Century America: In Search of Unity (San José and Berkeley: Pelé Yoetz Books, 1987), 52; 54.
[29] Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History, 2005, 62. The authors prefer the expression “category of practice.”
[30] See, for example, Moise Gadol, “El rolo del jurnal ‘La Amerika,’” (December 29, 1911), p. 2.
[31] Joel Sanchez, “Wrestling with the Angel of Identity: Jews of Color,” M.S.W. thesis, Smith College, 2006, 17. See also Diane Kaufmann Tobin, Gary A. Tobin, and Scott Rubin, In Every Tongue: The Racial and Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People (San Francisco, CA: Institute for Jewish and Community Research, 2005) and Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, The Colors of Jews: Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007).
[32] Sanchez, “Wrestling with the Angel of Identity,” 17.
[33] Glazier, “The Indianapolis Sephardim: An Essay,” Shofar 3:3 (1985): 27?34; 31.
[34] William Isaac Thomas, Old World Traits Transplanted (Montclair, New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1971 [1921], 200, citing “Rene Darmstadter, The Jewish Community (manuscript),” which I have not been able to locate.
[35] “Tribuna Libera: Lo Ke Nuestros Lektores Pensan: Porke No?,” La Bos del Pueblo (May 26, 1916): 6. Clara’s letter appears in Ladino translation only.

[36] [Moise Gadol], “El rolo del jurnal ‘La Amerika,’” La America (December 29, 1911): 2. The short-lived newspaper Gadol says he launched before La America in reaction to co-ethnic recognition failure was probably La Aguila, the country’s first Ladino newspaper.
[37] [Moise Gadol], “Por La Lingua,” La America (December 9, 1910): 1.
[38] Ibid. For another example of La America used as proof of Jewishness see [Moise Gadol], “La Nasión Judía i nuestros ermanos de Turkía,” La America (January 5, 1912): 3.
[39] Max Aaron Luria, “Judeo-Spanish Dialects in New York City,” in John D. Fitz-Gerald and Pauline Taylor, eds., Todd Memorial Volume Philological Studies, 2 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), 2: 7?16; Jack Glazier, “American Sephardim, Memory, and Representation of European Life,” in Stacy N. Beckwith, ed., Charting Memory: Recalling Medieval Spain (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000), 307-309, 310, “Stigma, Identity, and Sephardi-Ashkenazic Relations in Indianapolis,” in Walter P. Zenner, ed., Persistence and Flexibility: Anthropological Perspectives on the American Jewish Experience (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 47?62, 51?52, and “The Indianapolis Sephardim: An Essay,” Shofar 3:3 (Spring 1985): 27?34, 31?32; Leon A. Ligier, “The Chicago and Los Angeles Sephardic Communities in Transition,” The American Sephardi 2: 1-2 (1968): 80-82; 80; Walter P. Zenner, “Chicago’s Sephardim,” American Jewish History 79:2 (1990): 221?241, 233?234; Stephen Stern, The Sephardic Jewish Community of Los Angeles (New York: Arno Press, 1990), 98?100 and “Ethnic Identity Among the Sephardic Jews of Los Angeles,” Young Sephardic Voice (1974): 143; Joan Dash, “Sephardim in Seattle,” National Jewish Monthly (May 1963): 12–13, 49–50; 12; Marc D. Angel, “Sephardic Culture in America,” in Abraham D. Lavender, ed., A Coat of Many Colors: Jewish Subcommunities in the United States (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977), 277?280; 277 and La America: The Sephardic Experience in the United States (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1982), 52; Papo, Sephardim in Twentieth Century America, 47; Richard Glaser, “Greek Jews in Baltimore,” Jewish Social Studies 38: 3/4 (summer-autumn 1976): 321?336; 328; for Atlanta, Marcie Cohen Ferris, Matzoh ball gumbo: culinary tales of the Jewish South (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 166; and for Syrian Jews, Joseph A. D. Sutton, Magic Carpet: Aleppo-in-Flatbush: The Story of a Unique Ethnic Jewish Community (New York: Thayer-Jacoby, 1979), 23.
[40] [Moise Gadol], “Por La Lingua,” La America (December 9, 1910): 1.
[41] Nitza Druyan, “Yemenite Jews on American Soil: Community Organizations and Constitutional Documents,” in Daniel J. Elazar, et al., eds., A Double Bond: Constitutional Documents of American Jewry (Lanham, New York and London: University Press of America: 1992), 93?100; and Dina Dahbany-Miraglia,

“American Yemenite Jews: Interethnic Strategies,” in Walter P. Zenner, ed., Persistence and Flexibility: Anthropological Perspectives on the American Jewish Experience (New York: State University of New York Press, 1988), 63?78.
[42] Dahbany-Miraglia, “American Yemenite Jews: Interethnic Strategies,” 67. For Yemeni Jews as a physiologically varied group often mistaken for gentile Hispanic and black in the United States, see Yael Arami, “A Synagogue of One’s Own,” in Loolwa Khazzoom, ed., The Flying Camel: Essays on Identity by Women of North African and Middle Eastern Jewish Heritage (New York: Seal Press, 2003), 101?113; 104.
[43] The idea that Jews embody indelible, physical differences, however, is much older. See Sander Gilman, The Jew’s Body (New York: Routledge, 1991).
[44] Cynthia L. Pickett and Marilynn B. Brewer, “The Role of Exclusion in Maintaining Ingroup Inclusion,” in Dominic Abrahams, et al., eds., in The Social psychology of inclusion and exclusion (New York: Psychology Press, 2005), 89?111; 90.
[45] Albert Adatto, “Sephardim and the Seattle Sephardic Community,” M.A. thesis, University of Washington, 1939, 63 and 64; David Sitton, Sephardi Communities Today (Jerusalem: Council of Sephardi and Oriental Communities, 1985), 357.
[46] David de Sola Pool, “The Immigration of Levantine Jews into the United States,” Jewish Charities (1914): 4,11: 20.
[47] See, for example, [Moise Gadol], “La Nasión Judía i nuestros ermanos de Turkía,” La America (January 5, 1912): 3 and “El emportante raporto del Bureau Oriental,” La America (January 12, 1912): 2.
[48] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “A Place in the World: Jews and the Holy Land at the World’s Fairs,” in Jeffrey Shandler and Beth S. Wenger, eds., Encounters with the “Holy Land”: Place, Past and Future in American Jewish Culture (Philadelphia: National Museum of American Jewish History, 1997): 60?82; 68.
[49] N.a., “Discussion,” in Jewish Charities 4:2 (1914): 29.
[50] American Jewish Archives (Cincinnati), Joseph M. Papo papers, Albert J. Amateau to Joseph M. Papo, April 7, 1976, 2 pages, p. 1.
[51] Ibid., p. 2.
[52] Tracy McLaughlin-Volpe, Art Aron, Stephen C. Wright, and Gary W. Lewandowski Jr., “Exclusion of the Self by Close Others and by Groups: Implications of the Self-Expansion Model,” in Dominic Abrahams, et al., eds., in The Social psychology of inclusion and exclusion (New York: Psychology Press, 2005), 113?134; 126?127.
[53]Glazier, “The Indianapolis Sephardim” and “American Sephardim,” 309. Cohen was a World War II veteran and resided in Indianapolis until the 1950s. Monastir is today the city of Bitola in the Republic of Macedonia.

[54] Glazier, “Stigma, Identity, and Sephardic-Ashkenazic Relations,” 51.
[55] Stern, “Ethnic Identity Among the Sephardic Jews of Los Angeles,” 136.
[56] See, for example, Maír José Benardete, “A Look into the Historical Significance of the Sephardim, their History and Culture,” in Marc D. Angel, et al., Four Review on Stephen Birmingham’s Book The Grandees, Tract No. 9 (New York: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 1971), 27?37; 35?36.
[57] Sutton, Magic Carpet, 151; Jack Marshall, From Baghdad to Brooklyn: Growing up in a Jewish-Arabic Family in Midcentury America (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2005), 46; Victory Bulletin [Brooklyn, N.Y.], 1942?1945, passim; and personal observation.
[58] Linda Cohen, “Captain Silvera, Community, M.D. Doing Valiant Work in England,” Victory Bulletin 3: 2?3 (February-March 1944): 3.
[59] Sutton, Magic Carpet, 151.
[60] Dahbany-Miraglia, “An Analysis of Ethnic Identity Among Yemenite Jews,” 179, “Acculturation and Assimilation: American Yemenite Jews,” Perspectives: Research, instruction and curriculum development, a journal of the faculty, New York City Technical College, CUNY X (1987?1988): 121?134; 130, and “On the Outside Looking In: Reflections of a Natural Feminist,” [3], [4] and [5] (unpublished, unpaginated manuscript, courtesy of the author). For parallel examples in the State of Israel see the aforementioned works by Dahbany-Miraglia; Morris B. Gross, “Exploration of the Differences in Pre-School Learning Readiness and Concomitant Differences in Certain Cultural Attitudes Between Two Subcultural Jewish Groups,” Columbia University, Ed.D., 1966, 1; and Lev Hakak (Dorothea Shefer-Vanson, trans.), Stranger among Brothers (Los Angeles: Ridgefield Publishing, 1984), 117?118. For an example of the term applied to an Eastern Sephardic Jew see Jodi Varon, Drawing to an Inside Straight: The Legacy of an Absent Father (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 52.
[61] Ignacio Klich, “Arab-Jewish Coexistence in 1900’s Argentina: Overcoming Self-Imposed Amnesia,” in Ignacio Klich and Jeffrey Lesser, eds., Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America: Images and Realities (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998), 1?37; 19?20.
[62] Aschheim, Brothers and Strangers, 250.
[63] José M. Estrugo, Los Sefardíes (Havana: Editorial Lex, 1958), 65.
[64] Glazier, “American Sephardim,” 315.
[65] Ira Robinson, ed., Cyrus Adler: Selected Letters, 2 volumes (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of American/New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1985): I: 46.
[66] Nahum Slouschz, Travels in North Africa (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication

Society of America, 1927), 168.
[67] Ibid., 253.
[68] Aschheim, Brothers and Strangers, 252.
[69] Ibid.
[70] See the literature and media discussed in Edward S. Shapiro: We Are Many: Reflections on American Jewish History and Identity (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2005).
[71] See, for example, Nissim Rejwan, “From mixing to participation: Social implications of the rise of Israel’s ‘Black Panthers,’” The New Middle East 32 (May 1971), 20?24; 22.
[72] Tobin, et al., In Every Tongue; Suzanne Selengut, “Jewish Like Me,” The Jerusalem Report (April 11, 2011), 28?31 and 33.