Is Sephardic a Name Brand?

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Professor Mushabac teaches English at CUNY and was recently a Mellon Fellow. Her book Melville’s Humor won high praise from Irving Howe, Alfred Kazin, and Morris Dickstein. She’s co-author of A Short and Remarkable History of New York City, selected as one of the “Best of the Best” by the American Association of University Presses, and now in its 5th printing. Her radio play, commissioned for National Public Radio broadcast, Mazal Bueno: A Portrait in Song of the Spanish Jews, featured Tovah Feldshuh. This article appears in issue 7 (May 2010) of Conversations, the Journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.
We're addicted to branding. By we, I mean Americans, but it's probably true of most people, and for good reason. Seeking out name brands may be a simple and effective survival tactic. Pick a good brand (olive oil, car, university) and you feel confident you will live and be well, otherwise, who knows? Conversely, we don't just buy brand names, but sell them. For success in business, or in the arts, college graduates were told at a recent convocation, you must brand yourself, figure out and highlight the one key brandable thing you have to offer, and name it in a way that sparks recognition and interest.

I was traveling with a college friend in Mexico many years ago. We were up in the mountains of Chiapas. We saw a woman weaving against a tree in a method that predated Cortes. The area had no roads! Vehicles couldn't get there! We had gone up by horseback, led by an indefatigable seventy-year old Swiss woman named Trudy Blom. Seeing the Mexican weaver-woman there on the high open plateau, her posture holding her body-loom tight out from the trunk of a tree, it was as if time had stopped. It had, in a sense. I could look up at the moon and it looked the same as it had for all time, but the truth was Americans had walked on the moon the previous day (this was the summer of 1969), and all we could see was the people-less moon, because the town where Ms. Blom's lodging-house was

located didn't have a single television set, and the moon was as it had been for eons, a serene brightly lit orb in the sky, the very same one from creation that divided night from day.

In Oaxaca, a famous city we visited the following week, my friend and I did the usual things, taking walks, shopping for local crafts in the market. But suddenly there was a drugstore, and we went in. We didn't need anything pharmaceutical or cosmetic-we didn't need anything, really. But we needed a fix, a fix of branding. I needed to see shelves of packaging in sharp American colors. Why? Because in Mexico many things had an earthen cast, an unmarked or unmarketed existence, like breathing, one of those things we can and do take for granted, unheralded, quiet, necessary, but without the intense attention and excitement of a brand name and a marketing, packaging, and distribution campaign behind it. Seeing the shelves of packaged items ridiculously allowed me something I needed in order to feel connected in the world. I didn't expect to need that kind of fix, because I don't love drugstores (or the American mania for packaging). I've steered away from drugstores when I could, and for example, avoided colorfully boxed cough syrup for my children, finding that honey-milk hand-spooned by my mother to her first grandson worked, as they say, like a charm.

Aviva Ben-Ur's recent book, Sephardic Jews in America: A Diasporic History (NYU Press, 2009), by its title seemed to offer a chance to understand precisely the Sephardic contribution to American Jewish history, and suggest a way to a serious recognition of a group that is a central part of my identity and worldview. Reading it was a stop on a journey perhaps not surprising in someone with a name as unusual as Mushabac, a name which I kept after marriage, because it connected me so directly to something I cherished. Being a Turkish Jew on both sides of my family represented a history of Jews who tenaciously stood their ground for thousands of years, despite obstacles and mortal threats, and clung to their community not only with determination, but with pleasure and celebration. Some people have said the exciting thing about being Sephardic is feeling nostalgia for Spain, where Jews thrived for a thousand years, or for the Ottoman Empire, where they lived for five hundred years, keeping up various aspects of Spanish heritage such as the language of Ladino, and appealing traditions of cooking and music. However, nostalgia has a mirage-like quality and ultimately we need something infinitely more solid to pin a future on.

When we study American ethnic or immigrant history, sometimes, even though we know this approach can be as simplistic as indulging in nostalgia, we hazard a definition of a "contribution" of a specific group. For instance, Koreans in 1970s

New York can be said to have contributed to our city by opening colorful flower and fruit stands that brought light and activity 24 hours a day to formerly grim neighborhoods: they dramatically changed the face of New York. Perhaps Dr. Ben-Ur's book would name and describe the American Sephardic "contribution" and package it neatly for distribution to Jewish and other channels. Presto, a brand, and the satisfaction of branding.

Her book doesn't do this. Instead it clearly shows a Sephardic American identity that has been toovariegated and fragmented to have a specific impact. The fact is that Sephardic Jews, because they were only a tiny percentage of the million and a half Jewish immigrants that came to New York over the past century, and because the relatively tiny Sephardic group came from many countries and spoke many languages, and thus couldn't communicate with each other, and especially since Sephardic today has come to mean any non-Ashkenazi Jew (Iberian and Mizrahi), as Ben-Ur puts it, there was and is "no critical mass." Instead of finding critical mass, Ben-Ur focuses in good part on the treatment of Sephardim by other Jews, and tensions between Western and Eastern Sephardim.

In one fascinating chapter, nonetheless, Ben-Ur provides what she calls a test-case on Sephardic impact. She tells how the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew came to prevail in Palestine beginning in the late 1800s. She suggests that this contribution can be credited in part to the prestige of the Palestinian Sephardic community. To Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, for example, Sephardic men in Palestine who worked on making a living contrasted sharply with the unhealthy-looking Ashkenazi men there who were bent on religious fervor; Sephardim and their Hebrew represented a new future. Reviving Hebrew was, if I may, a form of branding, and adopting Sephardic pronunciation was linguistically appealing and bold. While this story has a charm as Ben-Ur details its developments over decades, it illustrates Ben-Ur's key point, that in the United States, at any rate, as opposed to Palestine and Israel, there was no decided Sephardic "contribution" at this level.

Actually Ben-Ur steers us away from naming any "contribution, " Sephardic or Ashkenazi. She faults the "impact" paradigm of historiography. She says impact paradigms are problematic, based on questionable assumptions. She is really more interested in how groups are treated and seen in the world, especially in how people are marginalized, shoved off the page and out of our consciousness, and how they defend themselves. Her focus, in short, is on an "exclusion" paradigm. Also, she focuses only on the first fifty years of the twentieth century, and mostly on the Sephardic Jews with roots going back to Spain, such as

Turkinos (Turkish Jews).

This approach threw me back on my original question. It was surely important to see the difficulties encountered by Sephardim in New York, and satisfying to see how they suffered condescension and worse, yet summoned the will to find their own way, with persistence and creativity, and thoughtful and memorable leadership on the part of many of the antagonists. But following closely this woven history of exclusion and inclusion left me still wanting to know what this group had to offer. What do Sephardim have to offer? I keep wanting to think globally through a thousand years of history to connect all the illustrious dots. In fact anyone can Google "Sephardic Jews" to create his or her own Encyclopedia Sephardica, which would range from Maimonides codifying a rational Judaism to Emma Lazarus announcing the golden door; from Jacob Rodriguez Rivera inventing spermacetti candle-making to Uriah Levy getting the U.S. Navy to prohibit flogging (where would Herman Melville have been without these two men?); from world-class pianist Murray Perahia, singing in the boys' choir in a Grand Concourse Sephardic congregation, to David Amram-maverick musician, composer, conductor, and writer. Shall we leave out Sephardic Jacques Derrida because we've heard too much about him, or Joe Elias, because we've heard too little about him? Elias learned hundreds of songs at his mother's knee, and taught Ladino singing for years at N.Y.C.'s Hebrew Arts School. What about Gracia Mendes Nasi, the grand dame and managerial titan of Early Modern Europe? What about Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Cardozo, or five Sephardic Jews who I've read have won Nobel prizes: we all know Elias Canetti, but do most people even know Baruj Benacerraf, Rita Levi-Montalcini, Claude Cohn-Tannoudji, and Salvador Luria are Jewish? Rabbi Marc Angel, of course must be mentioned with a full description of his works, and especially his 1991 Voices in Exile: A Study in Sephardic Intellectual History, his glimpse of something provocatively simple and natural in his 2006 Foundations of Sephardic Spirituality: The Inner Life of Jews of the Ottoman Empire, his award-winning new book on Maimonides and Spinoza, and his ground-breaking new organization, which sponsors this very publication, and boldly rebuts authoritarianism in the orthodox world. And what about Sacha Baron Cohen! Okay, he's scandalous-and we're going far afield, but doesn't Sacha Baron Cohen break new ground in American and European popular culture - connect with the future, wake up the bored, and put a Sephardic flag on the moon? Do we have a brand here?

Dr. Ben-Ur's book, of course, is simply not about any of this. Nonetheless, after all her eliminations and disputations, after detours that are interesting but incidental, for instance on Columbia University's prestigious, but not very

Sephardic, Hispanic-Sephardic initiative in the 1930s, she finishes with a simple statement that is quietly revelatory. She speaks of the corporate Jewish identity, and says if American scholars get bored with it, look here, to the Sephardim. That word corporate should stop us. It's a word that can cut two ways, reflecting stable reliable productivity on one side, and domineering greed and political manipulation on the other. But let's look for a moment at the predictable sameness of corporate production. Corporate means every sip of Pepsi-Cola-owned Tropicana tastes exactly alike, and has nothing to do with the oranges (even though they may be grown by corporations) that we squeeze on the spot, cutting in half five or six of them, getting the juice on the table, straining the pulp and seeds, and handing golden glasses of it off with pride to family members.

What is the corporate brand of Judaism? What is the corporate brand of Orthodox Judaism? Aren't Jews like everyone else allowed to want and enjoy a predictable, normalized, generalized homogenized product? Is there anything wrong with that? And if in many locations, Ashkenazim have given way to their more prominent Sephardic hosts, let's say in Istanbul, why should Sephardim not give way graciously to the vastly bigger numbers of the Ashkenazim in America, and join the corporate model? Famous Sephardic Americans may or may not be swept up into the general Jewish category, but in any event, is there any problem with Sephardim modestly stepping aside and accepting dominance by the sheer, vastly larger Ashkenazi numbers?

One of the problems with corporate identity is its smug assumption that the book has been written and is closed, the book of Judaism, or the book of Jewish identity. It's branded-in the bad sense, like an animal bound for slaughter, and whether it's because I'm Sephardic or simply Jewish, I find I resent a corporate Judaism. It's difficult to express how comforting it is to see the brand broken up. Congregation Shearith Israel hires a woman as an Assistant Congregational Leader-what a breakthrough!- or an African-American who has converted to Judaism, gives a lecture on his life as a practicing, engaged, fascinating Orthodox Jew. It is healing to see all the Iraqi and Turkish Jews out on the dance floor at the "mixed dancing" (men and women) celebrations at a synagogue's annual party. It's healing and comforting to hear Jean Naggar's reminiscences of her Egyptian Jewish childhood, or to hear the accents at a Bible class as people from Israel and Paris, Florida and Tunisia, express their individual responses to a biblical text. It's not just that if the corporate model of Judaism is accepted, some of us feel left out because our names are different-many Sephardic names of course are actually Hebrew-or that we look different (do we?). It's that the corporate model is deadly, not because it's fake, or made from concentrate, but because it has a telltale

medicinal aftertaste-it's not freshly squeezed. Jewish authenticity depends on dissent and difference, and without these elements we have lost our center, and our juice.

In the late 1950s my mother and I contemplated writing a Sephardic cookbook, and she queried a well-known Jewish publisher. He wrote back, "No one would be interested in that." Knowing now what we know about the health benefits of Mediterranean cooking and the Mediterranean lifestyle (and what Sephardim with many nonagenarian parents and grandparents have always known) , one can't help wonder at this old-time Ashkenazi insularity, which may still be among us. A friendly letter to Midstream's Winter 2010 issue noted that an occasional article on Yiddish or Ladino topics is interesting, but ultimately the writer asked the magazine please to limit such articles because these topics are not part of "our Weltanschauung." We know of course, why the writer used the German word, and didn't simply say "worldview." Branding. Meanwhile, Midstream has been ground-breaking with its July/August Yiddish-Ladino issues that it started in 2002.

We haven't even touched the terrible story of the disparaging treatment of Mizrahi Jews in Israel, Jews who make up almost half of the population of Israel! Sitting on my desk is Rachel Shabi's new book, We Look Like the Enemy, The Hidden Story of Israel's Jews from Arab Lands. The realities of that story are shameful.
We are addicted to branding. We all want the comfort of sturdily packaged familiar people and ideas. We want the prestige, why else start an article with our credentials? But we don't want to feel shut off, in a corporate can sealed with BPA plastic that like chicken fat and butter (we don't cook with them) may harm our bodies. Let in the air. In the Jewish world, as everywhere else, we desperately need an open system, agreeable to diversity, gracious to innovation, open to new voices.

Is there a Sephardic contribution to America? I've long wondered. Starting in high school I worked on that Sephardic cookbook, and still have the large index cards of my Turkish grandmother's recipes that my Bronx-born mother typed up. I've read books, attended wonderful courses and seminars. I've made lists of words we said at home as I was growing up, Bivas (Live!) when we sneezed, Kon salu (in good health) when we wore a piece of new clothing, Ijo d'una bova (son of a stupid woman) when someone was acting like a dope, Ya basta! (enough!), Kapara (when a glass broke, that glass was for God), and foods that expressed Sephardic joy, health, and celebration. I'm supposed to know about customs, but all I can think of is telling Joha stories, stories about the wise fool who coming

from his day's work in the fields to dinner, and being told he must have a dinner jacket, returns with his jacket and tells the jacket, "It's you they invited, Eat!" There are hundreds of Joha stories which many of us have retold and written about.

In 1992 when I was giving lectures through the Sephardic House lecture bureau to various organizations in the New York area, I decided the answer had to do with the difference between the perfect circle of the wheel and the odd-shaped circle of the olive- or the lemon. Ashkenazim are perfect like the wheel, always ready to go. The rest of us stop to chase an olive around the plate, or the olive chases us, or we see the world up close because we cook with so much exquisite lemon juice and have lived near water, and love to eat fish. Maybe it's an outspokenness, or zaniness-I think of that Hunter High School math teacher who threw chalk at students who fell asleep in her class. Maybe it's a female outspokenness. "Listen to Sarah," said God in Genesis, and perhaps ironically it was only in the patriarchal East in the Sephardic world where patriarchy was so elaborate and unintellectual that it counter-intuitively left the door open to women. Women have been great carriers of Judaism, with their monumental work of child rearing and cooking, but perhaps only Sephardic women had the fun of singing wild centuries-old Spanish ballads that romantically asked about my beloved coming down the stairs, or that raucously attacked a man for not being able to love someone other than himself. I don't know. But diversity represents an open system, and I know I crave it, and it suits my authentically Jewish soul. Without diversity we are rigid and dead. Those beds in Sodom and Gomorrah, we recall, cut off the feet of those who were too tall, and stretched the bodies of those who were too short.
As I sat and listened to that African-American convert to Orthodox Judaism and heard about his funny and interesting upbringing in the Jehovah's Witness religion, and how he gave speeches on Sundays to please his mother, and how his life today is totally Jewishly engaged at Ramath Orah on 110th Street near Broadway, I felt that a sharp sense of difference is what allows us to breathe. The system is open, we are breathing, not shutting out truth and life with refusal to accept difference.

Obviously we need both, a strong connection to the fixed, to the Jewish tradition in its most inalterable values and beliefs, but also a connection to the very unbranded thing of breathing, something natural and eternal, an open system. Diversity allows us to breathe, and without it we are not really here. In one of his novels, Henry James had a character surprisingly say in the midst of his very patriarchal world, "The women will save us." Perhaps the Sephardic contribution is its diversity. Perhaps Sephardim have contributed to the world by virtue of their

their interethnic mix, with all its surprises and openness, its outspoken women, its outspoken men. Boredom and insular stultification are terribly contrary to authentic Judaism. Dialectic is the absolute core of Judaism, from Abraham's argument with God about Sodom and Gomorrah to this week's Forward article, "War on Internet Is a Fight the Rabbis Can't Win." No one should say, "The Sephardim will save us." But everyone should say, "Diversity will save us." Jews, like everyone else, need to be saved from ourselves.