



CONVERSATIONS



Insights from the Sephardic Experience



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Issue 13

CONVERSATIONS

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SUBMISSION OF ARTICLES

If you wish to submit an article to *Conversations*, please send the editor (mdangel@jewishideas.org) a short description of the essay you plan to write. Articles should be written in a conversational style, without footnotes, and should be submitted typed, double spaced, as word documents.

Articles reflect the views of their authors, and do not represent official positions of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Conversations welcomes “letters to the editor,” commenting on articles that appear in its pages. Letters should be emailed to the Editor.

Conversations will be published three times per year: May, September, and January. Submissions must reach the Editor at least eight weeks before the first day of each publication month.

Editor's Introduction

lias Canetti, a Sephardic Jew who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981, offers some interesting observations about Jews in his book, *Crowds and Power*: “Fools may tell stories of their sameness everywhere, but any one who knows them well will be inclined to think that there are more varied types among them than among any other people. . . . Jews are different from other people, but, in reality, they are most different from each other.”

While we certainly can appreciate Canetti's insight, we also must keep in mind that in spite of so much diversity, the Jews continue to see themselves as one people. We share a long history, sacred texts, laws, and traditions. For thousands of years, each of our diverse communities has contributed to the totality of the Jewish experience. Although in some ways we are “different from each other,” in many more significant ways we are joined together by a shared identity and civilization. Indeed, the mystery of Jewish peoplehood is intimately linked both to our diversity and to our shared identity.

In this issue of *Conversations*, we present insights from the diverse Sephardic experience. We also include articles relating to Italian Jewry and the Bene Israel of India. As we gain deeper awareness of the contributions of these communities, we deepen our appreciation of the wholeness of the Jewish people. We see how our diversity adds profound strength to our unity.

This issue of *Conversations* opens with correspondence between Eli Haddad and Rabbi Nathan Lopes Cardozo on the nature of contemporary halakha. It continues with articles by Rabbi Marc D. Angel, Dr. Zvi Zohar, and Rabbi Daniel Bouskila relating to Sephardic views of halakha. Rabbi Isaac Sassoon provides scholarly insight into the various pronunciations of Hebrew among Sephardim, Ashkenazim, and other Jews.

Jewish spirituality has been enhanced by the contributions of generations of Jews. Professor Fabrizio Lelli writes of poetry, myth, and kabbala in

late medieval Italy. Ariel Evan Mayse explores the writings of Rabbi Hayyim Benattar, the author of the classic Torah commentary *Or HaHayyim*. Rabbi Hyim Shafner sheds light on the spirituality of the Bene Israel of India. Ronda Angel Arking discusses the spirituality of Grace Aguilar, an impressive Sephardic literary figure of nineteenth-century England.

We then turn to the experience of Sephardim of the Judeo-Spanish tradition. Dr. Aviva Ben-Ur writes of the cultural divides that created difficulties between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in twentieth-century America. Dr. Matthias B. Lehmann describes important features of Ladino religious literature. Dr. Jane Mushabac offers a personal glimpse into the Judeo-Spanish civilization, through the medium of song. Larry Azose ponders the future of the Judeo-Spanish Sephardic communities of the United States, focusing on his own community in Seattle.

Rachel Sopher muses about the nature of Sephardic identity in an American Jewish community where Sephardim are a relatively small minority. Dr. Bonnie Wasserman writes of her experiences in the small Sephardic communities of the Caribbean. Although much assimilation has taken place, a sense of Sephardic identity and Jewish identity continue to be felt.

We conclude this issue of *Conversations* with a review essay by Jack Raiton on the writings of the well-known Israeli Sephardic author, A. B. Yehoshua. This article not only expounds on Yehoshua's book *Mr. Mani*, but speculates about the larger implications of the book vis-à-vis a Sephardic worldview.

We are pleased to acknowledge a grant from the **Leon Levy Family Foundation** toward the publication of this issue of *Conversations*. Leon Levy, of blessed memory, was a proud Sephardic Jew of Judeo-Spanish background. For many years he served as President of the American Sephardi Federation, and he was the first (and so far only) Sephardic Jew to serve as Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations. During his lifetime, Leon sought to bring the insights and values of the Sephardic world to the entire Jewish community. We dedicate this issue of *Conversations* to his memory, with the hope that this publication represents another step forward in his life's mission.

We hope that this issue of *Conversations* will generate discussion and productive conversations among our thousands of readers. As we further

our exploration of Jewish diversity, we will surely come to a deeper appreciation of the vastness of the Jewish enterprise; we will expand our intellectual and spiritual horizons; and we will be a better, more united Jewish people.

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Together we can accomplish great things.

• • •

I had the honor of spending the weekend of March 16-18, 2012 with the community of Amsterdam's famous Portuguese Synagogue, Talmud Torah. I was invited to install their new Haham, Dayyan Pinchas Toledano. The Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam is the "mother" Congregation of my own Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City, founded in 1654. Our two Congregations share over 350 years of historical association and both maintain the Western Sephardic minhag. The installation of Haham Toledano underscored the historic connection of our Congregations, as well as the long-standing personal respect and friendship which Haham Toledano and I have shared over the years.

The Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, dedicated in 1675, is one of the glories of the Jewish people. It is a grand building, remarkably beautiful and impressive. It has seating for nearly 3,000 people. In recent years, it has been restored to its pristine beauty.

When one enters the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, one enters Jewish history. The Sephardic community of Amsterdam was established by ex-converts who fled the fires and persecutions of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions in order to return to Judaism. When they built the Esnoga, they were making a statement: we have survived the flames of the Inquisition, we are thriving, we are committed to the future of Judaism, our grand synagogue building is a testimony to our strength and our love of Torah, we have overcome adversity and we look to the future with optimism and confidence.

The Sephardic community of Amsterdam boasted world-class Hahamim, thinkers, writers, poets. It produced notable traders and merchant princes; during the seventeenth century, its adventurous members travelled to the New World to establish communities in South America, the Caribbean, and in North America. Over the years, the Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam continued to house a vital, dynamic and creative Jewish community.

During the 1940s, the Jews of the Netherlands became victims of the Nazi onslaught. Jews were rounded up, deported to concentration camps, and murdered in large numbers. I was told that 90% of the members of the Portuguese Synagogue were murdered during the Holocaust. This proud and mighty community—born in the flames of the Inquisition—was disastrously stricken.

But a remnant survived. With pride and tenacity, the community has worked to restore its magnificent synagogue building; to revitalize its spiritual life; to revive the spirit of courage and faith that has characterized the community for the past four centuries. It has appointed an illustrious Haham, Dayyan Toledano, to provide religious guidance and inspiration. Its lay leadership is dedicated, hard-working, tenacious, and hospitable.

When I prayed in the Esnoga, I felt that I heard the voices of the ghosts of past generations—all those good, pious souls who sacrificed so much for Judaism, who worked so hard for the Jewish community and the Jewish People. It was a haunting, ineffably moving experience for me.

When I left Amsterdam to return to New York, my thoughts lingered on the glories and tragedies of the Portuguese Synagogue. I felt a surge of spiritual uplift from the beautiful Shabbat I had spent in the Esnoga, and the magnificent ceremony of installation of Haham Toledano on Sunday, attended by four hundred of the city's Jewish community. I felt hope and optimism that the community will gain strength and spiritual vitality in the months and years ahead, and restore glory to Kahal Kadosh Talmud Torah.

Od Avinu Hai. Am Yisrael Hai.

Correspondence: Eli Haddad and Rabbi Dr. Nathan Lopes Cardozo on Reviving the Halakhic Process

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*Eli Haddad owns an International Marketing company.
He served as chairman of the board of education of Jewish
Studies at Hillel Yeshivah in Deal, New Jersey,
and is a board member of Ohr Torah.)*

To Rabbi Dr. Nathan Lopes Cardozo:

Dear Rabbi:

Your article the Spring 2010 issue of *Conversations* on “The Nature and Function of Halakha in Relation to Autonomous Religiosity” has inspired quite a bit of discussion in our family. Your comments have hit squarely home and crystallize the religious anomie of several of our recently married children. You issued a passionate call for responsible rabbinic leadership to meet the challenges of a less-than-dynamic halakhic process. This is vital to the authentic continuity of our traditions. Please grant me a few moments for a layman’s reflections on this matter.

Halakhic decision-making, since the sealing of the Talmud by Ravina and Rav Ashei in the fifth century C.E., has always been the province of local rabbinic authorities. The subtleties required for rendering the decision of complex issues can only be appreciated by the local rabbi. The local socio-cultural context provides the framework for a proper and relevant understanding of the issues involved. This feature of our halakhic process has kept our oral law perpetually dynamic and eternally relevant. The application of legal principles to changing local circumstance and nuance demands continuous adaptation. What may be right for one local community at a particular time and place may not necessarily be right for another congregation at the same time but in another region or country. How the values and principles of Torah are applied depends on the subtleties of social context.

The convergence of several unique factors in the broad social context of our information age has indeed bred the paralysis of halakhic evolution. To borrow a term from a popular author and journalist, I call these factors “flatteners”—“Halakhic Flatteners.”

1. *The emergence of the “professional rabbi”* in combination with other flatteners detailed below is probably the most important factor. The Sephardic tradition as detailed by Maimonides calls for community rabbis to serve the local community while pursuing their own professional or commercial career goals. Accepting fees for formal positions as “judge” or halakhic decisor was frowned upon. Yes, valid arguments against that position are made for today’s rabbinic leaders, especially in a world that is increasingly specialized. However, Maimonides’ point needs to be understood. The politics of deciding how to apply law need to be removed—decisions have to be rendered with complete INDEPENDENCE. The current legal decisions of the “professional rabbi” are not and cannot be free of political considerations. The dictates of serving synagogue boards as well as of supporting large yeshiva study centers promotes the practice of what we can label “political/commercial rabbinics” rather than practical rabbinics. Halakhic decision making becomes hostage to the necessity of maintaining crowd/communal popularity and raising money for rabbinic institutions to sustain salaried rabbinic positions rather than what may be necessarily “legally correct.”

2. *Instant global communication*—Any creative or innovative practice of any remote community is now instantly communicated. It is then subject

to analysis and critique by the “professional rabbis” whose interest may very likely be the promotion of their own authority, their own ideology, and their own local and vocal constituencies. The political and peer pressure of e-mails, blogs, and the internet can suffocate innovation and inhibit the correct application of law to circumstances that may demand a different rabbinic approach than the norm. Flat and politicized worlds cannot accommodate the flexibilities needed for dealing with the subtleties of local social context.

3. *Mass education*—With lifestyles focused on leisure rather than survival, more than ever before, more people are engaging in religious study. This establishes an exciting base for intellectual ferment and the possibility of a true Jewish Renaissance—unseen for centuries. However, there is nothing more dangerous than a little knowledge, especially when politicized in a world of instant communication. When all of these flatteners combine with the next flattener, the results are explosive.

4. *The revolt against secularism and the concurrent rise of religious fundamentalism.* This is an understandable reaction to the excesses of an indulgent society and an amoral culture. The constant bombardment of the individual with anti-traditional messages through every media portal can provide a justifiable basis for isolationism in ghettos. It is a rather natural reaction to the excesses of the age of greed and materialism (the 1980s and 1990s) and our new, in the words of President Obama, “*culture of irresponsibility.*”

5. *The rate of change of the social condition has quickened.* Women are now, for the most part, treated as equal in ability and opportunity to men. The nuclear family is under siege. Revolutions in the fields of medical and life sciences pose serious ethical and halakhic dilemmas. The major institutions that dominated society for millennia are withering. Indeed, the very premises of traditional cultural values are seriously challenged. Before the twentieth century, history was defined mostly by political and religious institutions. In the past century, this paradigm has changed. Technology, more than ever, is rapidly changing the institutional landscape. (An example: The Mideast revolutions and social media). In order to remain relevant, halakha must address these major and continuously changing social dynamics.

6. The paranoia in the Orthodox world created by Conservative and Reform Judaism (as well as the overwhelming success of assimilation.) The

success of alternate forms of Judaism in nineteenth-century Europe and later in America has created a charged atmosphere among Orthodox Rabbinic circles that promotes instant overreaction to any creative or lenient halakhic decision. The defense of “tradition,” is paramount, whether the suggested practice or halakhic ruling even defies Torah law itself.

These six convergent forces have contributed to the paralysis of the world of halakha. Set within this petrifying framework, the current method of rabbinic decision making cannot address rapidly changing general and local needs. It cannot address subtleties and shies away from confronting the serious moral dilemmas that accompany a world changing faster than ever. It loses elasticity as well as its dynamic capability. As we have stated, it is subject to the many political/commercial dictates of a centralized and remote Ivory Tower of rabbinic authority, most of whose leaders have retreated into the world of Fundamentalism, where change is anathema. And those rabbis who do attempt to resolve burning issues or deal with local needs are themselves burned in the process. Just look at the reactions to Rabbi Rackman, a”h, on the *aguna* issue or Rabbi Avi Weiss on just about any issue.

Hence, Rabbi Cardozo, *halakhic paralysis*.

I would like to suggest that *the solution to halakhic paralysis has to be halakhic*. I propose that we respect the legal process set in place after the Talmud was sealed in the fifth century. The rabbis determined that halakha must be locally applied; *kal vaHomer* (how much more so) in a world where the rates of change vary in its different social and local contexts. However, the current definition of a “local community” must be understood in terms of new twenty-first century understandings. Communities are no longer merely small towns, shtetls, or even local city neighborhoods. Communities are today defined as groups of individuals with common interest. Mention the word “community” today and most people think of the concept of virtual community, social media, Facebook, and blogs. In an age of leisure and mass transportation, mass education, and global communication, I suggest that this definition be broadened. The traditional physical neighborhoods of major urban centers and suburban enclaves can no longer be considered exclusively as local communities. Communities are now defined by activity or interest rather than exclusively by geography. There are gym and health club communities,

golf clubs, dance clubs, and political clubs. Communal life itself previously was characterized by long hours of work, the nuclear non-working mother family, and a local house of worship. This image of a local community is history. Therefore, the concept of halakhic rulings being rendered by LOCAL community rabbis must now respect the need for this expansion of the term “local community.”

Let me provide a concrete example:

Several years back I attended an unusual Saturday minyan on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. It was presented as an Orthodox service, where men and women sat separated by a *mehitsah*, in accordance with Orthodox custom. Otherwise, women were equal participants with men as Cantors, Torah readers, and Torah *olim*. It felt funny to me at first, since my background is Sephardic Orthodox. I approached the young, bearded Orthodox rabbi at the end of the service and inquired how he could halakhically justify this type of service. He answered that for this group, the egalitarian activity of the women is halakhically acceptable. He explained that the traditional reason of not allowing women to participate in the services is due to the concept of “*kavod tsibbur*,” or the fact that male congregants would not respect women as they would men, and that involving a woman in any part of the service would detract from the majesty of the service. This particular community of individuals *defined* their attendance at that minyan by their commitment to egalitarian principles. Therefore, the issue of *kavod tsibbur*, preventing women from participation alongside men in their minyan, just did not apply.

Here we have the halakhic process totally respected with complete authenticity but non-traditional practice.

Perhaps the evolution of halakha, which eternalizes our Torah and its values, has to respect the new expanded definition of “community” and allow the time honored practice of having “local” rabbis properly posek for their new communities. Consider the results of an exposure of our new young Jewish “activity/interest” communities to halakhic principles and their new “local” and contemporary application (as to why they might differ from other halakhic communities). This would not only inspire active inter and intra community debate, but stimulate new understandings of halakha and a new appreciation for committing and living our sacred halakha directed lifestyle.

In addition to a re-definition of “local community,” perhaps our lead-

ing rabbis should consider the use of twenty-first century technology to mitigate or “unflatten” some of our previously detailed “flatteners.” Perhaps our leading rabbis can develop a “Virtual Sanhedrin.” By that I suggest the development of a secure blog site where rabbis who share a common philosophy and respect for each other, can debate issues honestly, openly and in the cool, calm medium of a confidential and secure blog site, with controlled access only by this rabbinic group. Furthermore, I suggest that the debates conducted over this blog be done anonymously, with specific reference numbers assigned to each rabbi who would present their issues by numerical code. For important issues, this medium can provide the time to flesh out complications and develop more authentic legal rulings. The flatteners of rabbinic commercial/political issues, of larger than life personalities, and of instant publicity would be much more controlled. Real issues can be thoughtfully addressed and more honestly debated. This healthier debate process will result in more meaningful halakhic consensus and decision making. The fact that decisions are arrived at anonymously by group consensus will also provide political cover for any specific congregational or professional rabbi. I think the rabbis of the Babylonian Academies would have loved these incredible modern tools of communication for enhanced debate.

Perhaps this very same communication technology can be used to promote learning and to stimulate debate amongst active and involved community laymen. The e-mailing of “halakhic issue alerts” from the local community rabbi can become:

1. a terrific teaching tool
2. a confidential polling tool for the rabbi to feel out public opinion prior to issuing local decisions.
(A halakhic ruling should not be openly promoted if the community would not respect it; example: A young adult singles mixed dancing in Orthodox synagogues during the 1950s and 1960s)
3. a community energizer on large, common and serious issues.

Imagine the ferment and excitement generated by exploring an issue-like “organ donation.” (*Fragile—handle with care*)

Indeed, in a rapidly evolving, technologically developed world, certain halakhic questions require specific technical expertise. Here, perhaps, rabbis of like philosophy and mutual respect should consider establishing vir-

tual panels of specialists to deal with technical issues. Let us call this “the specialist blog.”

The panels can debate internally (à la the previous “virtual Sanhedrin” model) and, in turn, e-mail the rabbi who faces the difficult question.

I am sure this type of process currently functions in an informal manner. Why not formalize it and publicize its structure to the group of rabbis of like philosophy. I can suggest panels on:

1. Medically Assisted Conception and Birth
2. Living Wills and the Ethics of Artificial Life Support
3. The Digital Home on Shabbat

Lastly, and rather simply, why not utilize the medium of large flat screen streaming video and or DVD to present the positions and/or debates of rabbinic Superstars? Imagine a remote far-flung community gathering in a synagogue to hear a presentation of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Pluralism and its impact on halakha.

We have here several twenty-first century platforms that can truly energize local synagogue life as well as stimulate adult learning and commitment to a relevant halakhic process.

If I may summarize some of these ideas:

- a. an expansion of the term “local community”
- b. the “Virtual Sanhedrin”
- c. the “specialist” blog
- c. “Halakhic Issue Alerts”
- d. the “Streaming Superstar”

These simple ideas can be part of an overall process to liberate halakha from its paralyzing flatteners. Rabbi Riskin offers a wonderful spin to the classic talmudic episode of “the Tanur of Achnai.” This story deals with halakhic authority and ends with God chuckling as His support for the minority opinion on a halakhic issue is overturned by a rabbinic court. The classic Divine response is “*Nitzhuni Banai*”—“My children have defeated my argument.” Rabbi Riskin answers that perhaps we should read the text as “*Netzahuni Banai*”—as God saying “You have eternalized me”—that by making law subject to rabbinic decision making “*You have kept my law eternally relevant.*”

Rabbi Cardozo, we salute your inspired call to restore halakhic dynamism. As you have pleaded so forcefully, our rabbinic leadership

must respond now with new methods of decision making to keep our Torah eternally relevant.

Response to Eli Haddad:

Dear Eli,

I read your observations with great interest. While I fully agree with your thesis that halakha has been flattened for all the reasons you give, and while I admire the solutions you suggest, I believe there is another, much more fundamental problem we need to deal with. Unless we do, your solutions will not have the result you so desperately seek.

We are confronted with a terrible misunderstanding of what halakha is really all about and what it wants to accomplish.

It is not just on the practical level that halakha is flattened, but also on the ideological, religious level. We have separated halakha from a conscious awareness of God. Our halakhic living has ignored Him. We are more concerned about the specifics of halakha than we are about our existential relationship with God. No doubt this is partially the fault of the halakhic process itself. Even the Sages, when discussing these issues, rarely mention God in their conversation, making it very legal and often dry in a *religious* sense. The reason for this is obvious. There was no need to mention God in all these debates because they were thoroughly touched by His presence, just as water touches every part of our body while we are swimming. One does not have to mention water when completely immersed in it. God was the great background music to anything the Sages felt and said. In their view God was a challenge, not a mere notion. They had a trembling sense of the “hereness” of God. They realized that they were more known by God than God could ever be known by them.

In modern times, this religious experience has been lost on us. We study Talmud and halakha in ways that have been deeply affected by the secular environment in which we live. God-consciousness has left us. The majority of us are no longer *God-intoxicated*. Most if not all of our halakhic authorities have also fallen victim to this sad situation without even being aware of it. They decide on halakhic matters while God is not *actively* present. This does not mean that they do not believe in God or that they

have no *yirath shamayim*, but it does mean that they are not stirred by His presence *while* dealing with halakhic issues. How often is God mentioned in *sheeloth u-teshuvot*?

One needs to have a religious experience while deciding the halakha. Rabbis do not realize that one can only render a halakhic decision while simultaneously experiencing the wonder of life, the astonishment of existence and the marvel of Judaism. Halakha can only be decided on and lived when we ask the question: How are we able to, even *dare* to, live in His presence? Halakha is a protest against taking life for granted. One of its aims is to make us aware that there is *no* commonplace, *no* moment of insignificance, and *no* deed of triviality. Halakha is the attempt to undo the attitude of “everydayness,” but it can only work when we are fully conscious of this impediment and realize that there is no way to understand the meaning of halakha unless we make this goal our most important concern. If the *posek* (halakhic arbiter) does not realize that this is the function of the halakha and that *this* should be his *ultimate goal when making a decision*, his attempt to lay down the halakha is futile.

The problem we face is not realizing that halakhic living may become, if it hasn't already, a form of *avodah zarah* (idol worship). When we think that by following halakhic demands we will automatically draw closer to God, we are guilty of self-deception. We do not realize that we often use halakha as a way to escape Him. We believe that as long as we are living a halakhic life we do not have to make a supreme effort to draw closer to Him through the development of our God-consciousness. But this cannot be done by halakha. It needs to come from awe, from radical amazement, as Abraham Joshua Heschel called it. Only then is the halakha able to develop and deepen these notions.

This, however, is no longer part of Jewish education. We have allowed the spirit of halakha to be flattened and have incorporated this dullness into the way we teach our children Judaism. We have made Judaism common instead of an astonishing experience. No wonder many of our young people drop their Judaism!

Only after we have cultivated this God-awareness can we start speaking about proper halakhic observance. Its goal is to take this cognizance and introduce it into every level of our lives. The fact that we see an unhealthy emphasis on rituals, but a disregard for matters that relate to ethical standards, proves my point. Violence, a severe dislike for non-Jews,

and financial corruption within the Orthodox community, all of which are not even properly and fiercely condemned by our rabbinical authorities, are the obvious result of this escape from God in the name of halakha. If Orthodox Jews would *really* experience the awesome presence of God, how would it be possible for them to engage in these practices? (Is it not most remarkable that rabbis who suggest slight changes in Jewish rituals for the sake of greater religious devotion are condemned as heretics and as non-Orthodox, while those so-called Orthodox Jews who violate major tenets on the ethical side of Judaism are still considered to be Orthodox?)

When conversing with yeshiva students I often ask them how many years they have spent learning in yeshiva and how many *masekhtot* (talmudic tractates) they have studied. Once they tell me that they have mastered a good portion of the Talmud, I ask them what they would answer if a secular Jew, or a non-Jew, would ask them *why* they are religious. Nearly all of the students respond in total indignation and are completely taken back by this question. They have no answer. When I ask them how is it possible that after so many years of intensive study of religious texts they are still incapable of responding, the usual answer I receive is they have never thought about these questions, nor have their teachers ever discussed these matters with them. Topics such as religion, God, and the meaning of life are taboo in many yeshivoth. The half hour spent on *mus-sar* literature is, for the most part, nothing but lip service. These topics are treated as *hukath hagoyim*, meant for religious non-Jews, and too inferior for Jews to discuss. On several occasions I have challenged their teachers or rashei yeshivoth about this. Most of them, although not all, avoided my questions by telling me that more gemara learning or “another tosafoth” would do the trick. They were sincerely convinced that this was the solution to the problem. When I showed them the inadequacy of such an answer and kept pressuring them, it became crystal clear that they themselves were deadly scared of these topics. The policy was to ignore these issues and bury one’s head in the sand. When their students abandon yeshiva and, in today’s parlance, “go off the derekh,” they are totally surprised. But is this not obvious? What else should we expect?

God’s voice needs to be heard rising from the text, but we have long stopped teaching our students to hear it. It has been replaced with ceremonies, “observance” and *humroth* (stringencies), but not with holy deeds. *God is of no importance unless He is of supreme importance*, said Heschel.

In fact, many yeshivoth will skip—and not without pride—all non-halakhic texts, such as the aggadoth, which in fact deal with the most important dimension of halakhic living—the religious transformational purpose of the halakha. By ignoring these texts, they are sending a message to their students, not only that this part of the Talmud is inferior but that authentic religiosity is of little value. Teachers do not seem to realize that although halakha may be able to inform a person how to act in any given situation, it cannot provide insight into the quality of a given act, nor can it provide a sense of spiritual change that is the result of the performance of, or adherence to, a specific dictate. The power of aggadic and other non-halakhic material is in preventing mechanical observance and freeing man's spirit, as well as in suggesting *what* one's religious aspirations should be all about. Halakha is only the minimum of these religious aspirations. Religious non-halakhic material allows the unseen to enter the visible world and was formulated to give man the ability to go beyond the realms of the definable, perceivable and demonstrable.

Methods such as the Brisker approach to Talmud learning—today immensely popular in many yeshivoth—have in fact made this experience nearly impossible. While “hakiroth” and even “pilpul” may give spice to the discussion, they are unable to draw the student's attention to the existential meaning of what religiously needs to be accomplished through the engagement with these texts. This is a tragedy of the first order, for which Orthodoxy pays a heavy price. Precisely *that* which needs to be its most important goal has been totally dismissed and buried under the sand of halakhic discourse.

Another most important issue, which should be central to halakhic conversation, is the Jews' obligation to be “a light unto the nations.” The Jewish people have been called upon by God to be the instrument through which He enters into the lives of all people. The universal purpose of Am Yisrael is to inspire and to transform. This has serious consequences for *how* halakha should be applied and, above all, how it should be taught. Nearly no halakhic authority seems to make this a central point when dealing with halakhic issues. Most halakha is decided by focusing solely on the exclusive needs of the Jewish people. Universalistic issues are ignored. While some profound Hassidic thinkers and people like Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook dealt with these issues when writing *non-halakhic* works, I can think of only Hakham Benzion Uziel, the former

Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, who incorporated the universalistic mission as expressed by the prophets in his way of halakhic decision making. (See also Rabbi Dr. Marc D. Angel's book: *Loving Truth and Peace: The Grand Religious Worldview of Rabbi Benzion Uziel*, Jason Aronson, Inc., Northvale, New Jersey, Jerusalem, 1999)

Most present-day halakha is self-centered and often under the pressures of our galuth experience and defensiveness. (See Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits's *Hahalakha, Koha VTafkida*.) What is urgently needed is prophetic halakha.

One of the most serious complaints by young searching Jews, when studying halakha, is the absence of the notion of mission and concern for the rest of humankind. This flattens the halakha in ways that do great damage to its very image.

All that is mentioned in this letter is only the tip of the iceberg. Mainstream halakhic Judaism will become more and more irrelevant in the years to come, except for a small but growing community of religious Jews. But the more they will dedicate their lives to halakha, the more the rest of our people will be detached from it, for the very reasons the religious Jews get more involved: the stabilization of and self-satisfaction with halakhic living. halakha has become a platitude instead of being a great spiritual challenge. Our thinking is behind the times.

Reflections on Halakha and Piety

MARC D. ANGEL

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*A*mazingly, Jews have flourished for nearly 2,000 years in many different lands without having a central authoritative institution of halakha. In spite of differences of custom and emphasis, which have arisen among different groups of Jews, the essential unity of halakha was preserved. To this day, every Jew who adheres to halakha shares in a truly remarkable historic, religious, sociological, spiritual, and national enterprise.

Some individuals have called for the establishment of a new Sanhedrin in our times. They would like a revival of a central halakhic authority for the Jewish people. The Sanhedrin would not only provide unity in halakha, but would re-institute the original methodology of the oral law—interpreting the Torah itself, applying the law to life with the freedom to overrule precedents and previous decisions.

One of those calling for a Sanhedrin was the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Benzion Uziel (1880–1953). In a speech delivered on 12 Kislev 5697, he called for an authoritative rabbinic body along the lines of the Great Court of Jerusalem.¹ He viewed this effort as a continuation of

the work of Rabbi Yohanan ben Zaccai, who had been instrumental in establishing a quasi-Sanhedrin in Yavneh following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

Rabbi Uziel believed it was the responsibility of the rabbinate to work to achieve this goal. Rabbis are delegated the responsibility of establishing *mishpat*, justice. This refers not only to cases between contending individuals, but also to public issues, such as questions of taxation and communal needs. By working for a Sanhedrin, the rabbis would be working for a unifying force in Jewish life. Rabbi Uziel argued that one who simply knew how to rule on what is permitted and what is forbidden, or on who is guilty and who is innocent is not in the category of being a *posek*, a decisor of halakha. This person is known as a *talmid* or *talmid hakham*, a student or a wise student. To be a *posek*, however, involves having the power of the Great Court. Only the Sanhedrin can serve as a real *posek*. "The responsibility of the Sanhedrin was to clarify and distinguish between true interpretations (which are true to the spirit of the Torah) and casuistic interpretations (which are erroneous)."²

Rabbi Uziel writes that the *posek* draws conclusions from the Torah and the words of the prophets, as well as from the traditional oral law. "The *posek* in Israel is not bound by the decisions of the *posek* who precedes him. If he was, this would lead to great damage, in that an accidental error would be fixed as a permanent halakha even though it was erroneous in its foundation. In order to avoid this harmful eventuality, the authority of the Great Court was restricted only to the time in which it sits on the chair of judgment. But the decisions of the Great Court are not established as law and do not obligate the judges who will come after them to judge and to teach like them."³

Rabbi Uziel was deeply impressed by the work of Moses Maimonides and believed that Maimonides deserved the title *posek*. Maimonides worked to make the laws of the Torah known to the general public. In his comprehensive code of Jewish law, Maimonides recorded the halakha anonymously, to signify that it represents a consensus, not just the opinion of individuals. He not only gathered his material from all rabbinic literature, but he also derived benefit from the teachings of non-Jewish thinkers. "In this matter, by the way, Maimonides has informed us that in halakhic decisions one must comprehend all things on the basis of their content and truth, and not on the authority of their authors alone. Maimonides taught a great principle: Accept the truth from those who have stated it."⁴

In order to restore a central halakhic authority, Rabbi Uziel urged: “Let us arise and establish the Great Court in Jerusalem not in order to judge cases of fines or capital cases, and not in order to permit the firstborn because of its blemish. Rather, let us do so in order to solve the questions of life which confront us each day in our settlements and in our world, and in order to create a beginning for our destined redemption: ‘And I will return your judges as in the beginning and your advisers as formerly; for out of Zion will the Torah proceed and the word of God from Jerusalem.’”⁵

Until a Great Court is reestablished in Jerusalem, halakha is taught by leading rabbinical sages who draw on the vast rabbinic literature that has developed over the past several thousand years. There are variations of opinion on details of halakha; different sages rule differently. Still, the halakhic process continues to provide the framework for religious Jewish life. In order for a sage to be recognized as authoritative, he must not only have great erudition; he must not only be personally observant of halakha; he must also be fully faithful to the idea that halakha is the expression of the will of God to the Jewish people. Halakha, therefore, must be taken seriously on its own terms.

*A Sephardic Approach to Halakha*⁶

Without a Great Court in Jerusalem, it was only natural that different approaches to halakha developed among various Jewish communities during the past nearly 2,000 years. Customs and practices varied from place to place and from time to time. Attitudes toward halakhic study also differed. Certainly, the basic assumptions of the divinity of the Torah and the authority of halakha were accepted—but differences in style definitely did exist among religious Jewish communities throughout the ages.

Two major streams of Jewish tradition are the Ashkenazic and the Sephardic. Ashkenazim (*Ashkenaz* means Germany in Hebrew) primarily lived in Europe. In the Middle Ages they were concentrated in France, Germany, and Italy; gradually, the centers of Ashkenazic Jewry shifted to Poland, Russia, and Eastern Europe in general. The common feature of these communities is that they existed in Christian countries. They were included within the orbit of Western civilization.

The Westernization of these communities was intensified during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when European Jews were gaining rights of citizenship in the countries in which they lived. The doors of

Western civilization opened to them as never before. Jews studied in European universities; and they advanced in professional, cultural, and political life. Their struggles for civil rights were painful and not fully successful. Anti-Jewish attitudes and actual violence against Jews ultimately led many Ashkenazim to migrate to Israel, the United States, and other safe havens. The Nazi Holocaust during World War II decimated European Jewry, most of which was of Ashkenazic background. Yet, Ashkenazic Jewry today represents a large majority of world Jewry.

Ashkenazic numerical dominance has been matched by its cultural hegemony as well. Certainly, for the past three centuries and more, Ashkenazic rabbis have dominated halakha; Ashkenazic thinkers have dominated Jewish philosophy; Ashkenazic writers and artists have dominated Jewish cultural life.

The Sephardic Jews (*Sepharad* refers to Spain in Hebrew) enjoyed their period of dominance during the centuries prior to the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. The contributions of Sephardim to all areas of Jewish scholarship and thought—as well as to science, medicine, and mathematics—were impressive, unequalled in the Jewish world. Even during the century following the expulsion, Sephardic Jewry maintained a dynamic spiritual and cultural life that influenced world Jewry.

The considerable majority of Sephardim who left the Iberian Peninsula settled in Muslim countries. Although Sephardim also went to Italy, Holland, France, and other Western European locations, the much greater number flourished in non-Western environments. The Ottoman Empire provided haven for Sephardic refugees. Sephardic communities developed throughout Turkey, the Balkan countries, the Middle East, and North Africa. Their experience was different in many ways from that of the Ashkenazim of Europe. Indeed, the two groups of Jews—those of Christian Europe and those of the Muslim domains—lived in relative isolation from one another.

Although it is difficult to generalize about differences in the realm of halakha, it may be argued that there were different trends of halakhic thinking among the two groups, just as there were differences in world-views in general. It is of interest to explore the Sephardic approach to halakha since it may serve as an anodyne to the prevailing Ashkenazic approach. Since Sephardim lived among non-Western people, their perceptions and attitudes about Judaism may serve as a counterbalance to the preponderant Westernization of Judaism.

A people's attitudes are often conveyed through their words and actions when they are not self-conscious about being observed. They are implied in proverbs and songs, in the way people dress, in their gestures, in the way they express themselves. In order to comprehend a Sephardic approach to halakha, one must attempt to grasp the undocumented, non-explicit elements of Sephardic culture—elements that are known from sharing a people's mentality.

One element that needs to be considered is *joie de vivre*. Although Sephardim living in Muslim lands over the past centuries were generally quite observant of halakha, their observance did not lead them to become somber or overly serious. Pious Sephardim sang Judeo-Spanish love ballads and drinking songs at family celebrations in a natural way, without self-consciousness. Singing in a lighthearted spirit, even at public gatherings, did not strike them as being irreverent. Rather, the pleasures and aesthetics of this world were viewed in a positive light.

Sephardic holiday celebrations and life-cycle observances, for example, were characterized by the preparation of elaborate delicacies to eat, the singing of songs, and a general spirit of gaiety and hospitality. Sephardim appreciated colorful fabrics, fine embroidery, excellent craftsmanship in metals. On every happy occasion there was bound to be the fragrance of rose water, herbs, fresh fruits. All of these accoutrements—song, food, fragrances, decorative materials—gave the specific religious observance its distinctive quality. These things were not peripheral to halakha, but gave halakha its proper context: a context of love, happiness, and optimism.

This spirit carried itself even to the serious season of the High Holy Days, when self-scrutiny and repentance were expected. The travel account of Rabbi Simhah ben Joshua of Zalzhtsy (1711–1768) sheds interesting light on this fact.⁷ He traveled to the Holy Land with a group of ascetic Hassidim in 1764, and the majority of his Jewish co-passengers on the ship were Sephardim. The rabbi noted that “the Sephardim awoke before daybreak to say penitential prayers in a congregation as is their custom in the month of Elul.” He then added: “During the day they eat and rejoice and are happy at heart.” For Rabbi Simhah, this behavior may have seemed paradoxical: but the Sephardim themselves did not even realize that their behavior was in any way noteworthy. Their unstated assumption was that eating, rejoicing, and being happy of heart were not in conflict with piety, even in the serious season of penitential prayers.

Alan Watts has pointed out that in Western thought the individual is “split.” He is both himself and an observer of himself. Western culture teaches us to analyze ourselves, to see ourselves as though we are somehow outside of ourselves. We are both subjects and objects. Carried to an extreme, this way of viewing ourselves can be confusing and guilt inducing. It is as though we live our lives while seeing ourselves in a mirror. We are apt to become overly self-conscious, self-critical, and self-centered. Eastern culture, on the other hand, tends to be more holistic, less self-analytic. People are taught to live naturally and easily, without objectifying themselves much.

Watts has written: “The most spiritual people are the most human. They are natural and easy in manner: they give themselves no airs; they interest themselves in ordinary every day matters and are not forever talking and thinking about religion. For them there is no difference between spirituality and usual life, and to their awakened insight the lives of the most humdrum and earth-bound people are as much in harmony with the infinite as their own.”⁸

The Sephardim tended to have the Eastern, rather than the Western, attitude on life. The halakha was observed naturally and easily, as a vital part of life. Andre Chouraqui, in his study of North African Jewry, has noted that the Jews of the Maghreb were quite observant of halakha, yet “the Judaism of the most conservative of the Maghreb’s Jews was marked by a flexibility, a hospitality, a tolerance.” The Jews of North Africa had a “touching generosity of spirit and a profound respect for meditation.”⁹ These comments are equally applicable to Sephardim throughout the Mediterranean area.

These qualities were placed into halakhic terms by Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (1724–1806), one of the leading rabbinic figures of his time. He wrote that in matters of halakha, Sephardic sages clung to the quality of *hessed*, kindness, and tended to be lenient. Ashkenazim manifested the quality of *gevurah*, heroism, and therefore tended to be strict. Rabbi Azulai’s statement—regardless of its objective truth—is a profound indication of his own self-image. He and numerous other Sephardic rabbis saw themselves as agents of *hessed*. This self-image could not but influence the manner in which they dealt with questions of halakha. *Hessed* was not merely a pleasant idea or value, but a guiding principle.

H. J. Zimmels, in his book *Ashkenazim and Sephardim*, indicates that as a general rule Sephardim were more lenient than Ashkenazim in their halakhic rulings.¹⁰ He suggests that the Ashkenazic inclination to stringency was largely the result of centuries of persecution suffered by German Jewry. It also stemmed from the doctrines of the German Hassidim of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who emphasized strictness in religious observance. Groups of Ashkenazic Jews imposed upon themselves greater stringencies than the law demanded, and, in time, many of these observances became normative.

Rabbi Benzion Uziel offered an insight into the differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazic sages. Sephardic rabbis felt powerful enough in their opinion and authority to annul customs that were not based on halakhic foundations. In contrast, Ashkenazic rabbis tended to strengthen customs and sought support for them even if they seemed strange or without halakhic basis. The rabbis of France and Germany had a negative opinion of the rabbis of Spain, feeling that the Sephardic sages were too independent and irreverent toward tradition. On the other hand, the Sephardim felt that their method was correct and were quite proud of promoting it.¹¹

Sephardic tradition stressed the idea that the halakha is a practical guide to behavior. It is not a metaphysical system set aside for an intellectual elite. On the contrary, each person was entitled and obligated to understand what the halakha requires. It is not surprising, therefore, that the classic codes of Jewish law were produced in Sephardic communities. Sephardic scholars studied texts with the goal of applying them directly to actual situations. Therefore, they had to remain sensitive to the needs of people. This very sensitivity helped maintain the quality of *hessed* in halakha.

When halakha is studied as an intellectual system divorced from real-life situations, it may follow the dictates of logic and intricate reasoning rather than the dictates of human kindness. A legal conclusion might be reached in the abstract and then be applied to human conditions as a derick operation from above. This approach is contrary to the overall spirit of Sephardic halakhic thought.

Although it is incumbent upon each Jew to study Torah and halakha, difficult questions and disputes cannot always be solved by the individuals involved. Thus, over the past centuries, Sephardic communities nor-

mally appointed a chief rabbi, often referred to as *haham*, sage. He had the final word in matters of halakha for his community. The institution of *haham* provided the Jews with a recognized authority who could resolve their questions. When the Sephardim of the Island of Rhodes wanted to appoint a chief rabbi in the early seventeenth century, for example, they agreed that no one had the right to contest the *haham*'s rulings. "All which he will decide will be correct and acceptable as the law which was determined by the Court of Rabban Gamliel. . . . All which he will decide . . . will be correct and acceptable as a law of God's Torah as it was given at Sinai."¹²

The Jews of Rhodes linked their *haham*'s authority to that of the powerful court of Rabban Gamliel and to the Torah itself. Other Sephardic communities did likewise. This was a way of restoring, at least on a communal level, the original function of the Great Court in Jerusalem, which, according to Maimonides, was the essential institution of the halakha.

Rabbi Joseph Taitasak (sixteenth century, Salonika) expressed this idea clearly: "Know that each and every community has authority over its members, for every community may legislate in its city just as the Great Court could legislate for all Israel."¹³

Law and Life

Since halakha is an all-encompassing guide to life that describes what God wants us to do, it is essential that we understand its role in our lives. Observing the mitzvot is a Jew's way of connecting with the eternal reality of God. To treat halakha as a mechanical system of laws is to miss its meaning and significance. Halakha provides the framework for spiritual awareness, religious insight, and even spontaneity.

At the root of halakha is the awareness that God is overwhelmingly great and that human beings are overwhelmingly limited. Humility is the hallmark of the truly religious person. One must be receptive to the spirit of God which flows through the halakha and to the religious experience that it generates.

A true sage must be humble; arrogance is a sign of not understanding the real lesson of halakha. Solomon Schechter, in his beautiful essay about the mystics of Safed of the sixteenth century, quotes Shlomel of Moravia, who described the scholars, saints, and men of good deeds of Safed, indicating that many of them were worthy of receiving the Divine Spirit.

“None among them is ashamed to go to the well and draw water and carry home the pitcher on his shoulders, or go to the market to buy bread, oil, and vegetables. All the work in the house is done by themselves.”¹⁴ These sages followed the model of talmudic rabbis who also did not find it beneath their dignity to work at menial tasks. Egotism and a sense of inflated self-importance are contrary to the spirit of Jewish religiosity.

It is interesting to note how this ideal has been somewhat diminished among Western Jews. Isidore Epstein, in his study of the *Responsa* of Rabbi Simon Duran, displays a Western bias when he writes that “the multifarious functions of the rabbis [of North Africa] also testify to the low standards of Jewish culture of North African Jewry. In adverting to Jewish past and present day history, we cannot fail to notice that wherever there is a strong, virile and advanced Jewish life, there is the tendency to keep the rabbinical office distinct from other callings: and the combination of rabbinical charges with other functions is a sign of decadence and of lack of appreciation of learning as such. North Africa in our period exhibited that characteristic system of cultural decline. There the rabbi was not ‘rabbi’ in the understood sense of the word, but combined with that office the functions of school teacher, slaughterer, and reader to the consequent lowering in his prestige and rabbinical authority.”¹⁵

Epstein’s assumption that it is a sign of decadence when rabbis assume responsibilities other than purely academic is quite absurd. The contrary seems much truer. The talmudic sages assumed other responsibilities, as did the outstanding sages of the Sephardic world, and they did not feel demeaned thereby. It is precisely when rabbis relegate to themselves purely academic functions and when they consider it undignified to meet other communal needs that egotism and pettiness arise. It is actually to the credit of North African Jewry and many other Sephardic communities as well, that rabbis often served in practical capacities, participating more fully in the life of their communities. This was not at all a shame for them or a reflection of cultural decadence for the communities.

Humility is a virtue that halakha fosters for sages and laypeople alike. Rabbi David Ibn Zimra (sixteenth century) offered an explanation of a rabbinic dictum that one is not supposed to argue with the greatest of the judges who has made a ruling on a legal question. But what if that judge is wrong? Shouldn’t the lesser judges have the right and responsibility to dissent? Rabbi David Ibn Zimra explains that the dictum was not intend-

ed as a warning for the lesser judges but rather for the greatest judge. The judge occupying the highest position should not give his decision first because others will be afraid to argue with him. His decision will intimidate the others. Therefore, true justice demands that the greater judges withhold their opinions until the lesser ones have had their say. In this way, all opinions can be evaluated fairly and without intimidation or arrogance.¹⁶

In a similar spirit, Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai comments on a passage in the Ethics of the Fathers that teaches that each person should prepare himself to study Torah since it does not come to him as an inheritance. Rabbi Azulai notes that each sage received his specific portion from Sinai and therefore even a great sage needs to learn from others. No scholar is self-sufficient; no sage inherits all wisdom. It is necessary for everyone to be humble, to be open to the opinions of others, to try to learn from everyone.¹⁷

Piety

Many wonderful and horrible things have been done in the name of religion. George Bernard Shaw once wrote: "Beware of a man whose God is in Heaven." It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to have reasonable communication with someone who feels that he knows Truth, that only he and those who share his beliefs are absolutely right.

There have been great prophets, mystics, and pietists who have lived their lives in relationship with God. There have also been inquisitors, murderers, and arrogant criminals who have thought that they acted according to the will of God. If religion attracts the most sensitive and thoughtful people, it also draws those who wish to seem important and holy in the eyes of others, who use the cloak of religion to hide their own egocentric purposes.

Since the Jewish religious tradition is deeply tied to halakha, it is not surprising that there have been people who have found their self-importance in legalism. There is a fine line between pious devotion and misguided asceticism. Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulai has taught that one should not follow unnecessary stringencies in law. Even in private, one should not be overly stringent, unless he is motivated by pure and humble piety.¹⁸ Those who do accept additional obligations upon themselves should not consider themselves superior to others who do not accept such stringencies. A truly pious person feels no need to compare his piety to

that of others; his life is lived in relationship to God; he lives with humility and equanimity.

Jewish history has witnessed the honest spirituality of innumerable pious men and women who have sincerely served God through their observance of halakha. It has also witnessed pietistic movements, where groups of people observed Jewish law with intensity and introduced pious customs into Jewish religious life. Such movements include the German Hassidim of the thirteenth century; the Sephardic mystical schools of the sixteenth century; the Hassidic movement of the eighteenth century; the Mussar movement of the nineteenth century. These and other religious movements called on Jews to deepen their religious experience by intensifying their observance of halakha and by adopting additional pious practices.

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero of sixteenth-century Safed, for example, composed a list of rules for Jews to observe. The following are some of his recommendations.¹⁹ One should not turn one's heart from meditating on Torah and holiness, so that one's heart will constantly be a sanctuary for the Divine Presence. One should never allow him or herself to become angry. One should always be concerned about the needs of one's fellow beings and should behave kindly to them. One should behave nicely, even with those who transgress the laws of the Torah. One should not drink wine except on Shabbat and holy days. One should pray with concentration. One should not speak badly about any person or any other living creation of God. One should never speak falsehood or even imply falsehood. One should meet with a friend each Friday evening to review what has occurred during the course of the past week. One should recite the afternoon prayer with a prayer shawl and tefillin. One should chant the Grace after Meals aloud. Each night, one should sit on the ground and lament the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, and should also cry over one's own sins, which lengthen the time before our ultimate redemption. A person should avoid being part of four groups that do not receive the Divine Presence: hypocrites, liars, idlers, and those who speak evil about others. One should give charity each day in order to atone for one's sins. One should pay one's pledges immediately and not postpone them. One should confess one's sins prior to eating and prior to going to sleep. A person should fast as often as his or her health allows.

These rules, and other similar ones, stem from the overwhelming desire of religiously sensitive people to serve God in fullness. The more

they can do, the closer they feel to the Almighty. When their deeds are performed in the spirit of love and selflessness, they are spiritually meaningful. The problem, of course, is that these rules of piety may themselves become merely mechanical observances.

The genius of halakha is that it provides Jews with a medium for approaching God on a constant basis. Each law, each observance is a link between the human and the divine. But the power of halakha cannot be appreciated without spiritual sensitivity, openness and—above all—humility.

Saintliness

It is a rare experience to be in the presence of a truly saintly person who lives in a deep relationship with God. We might describe such a person as having wisdom, humility, inner peace, tranquility. The saintly person lives life on a different plane from most other people. One cannot attain saintliness as the result of following any specific prescriptions. There are no schools to educate and graduate saints. There are no rituals or techniques which, if followed, will result automatically in the creation of a genuinely pious person.

In describing the actions and observances of deeply pious people, we only describe the evident and superficial aspect of their lives. Their inner lives remain a secret to us. We are intrigued with such people because we do not understand their inner beings.

Following the external dictates of halakha does not guarantee the quality of saintliness. Without mystical insight, without an all-encompassing love, the practitioner of halakha mimics saintliness. Halakha must be experienced as a fulfillment of the will of God if it is to generate spirituality.

Modern Western society does not place a particularly high premium on saintliness. Our society is achievement-oriented, pragmatic, materialistic. Even religion is profoundly influenced by these values. Religious institutions are concerned with perpetuating themselves—raising money, obtaining members, providing services. Prayer services might pass for good (or not so good) theater. They may provide parodies of prayer where people appear to be praying while having no sense of the presence of God. It is difficult to preach about God and mystical saintliness except to unusual individuals.

The ideal of halakha is to create righteous, pious people. Even those who may never attain this spiritual level still need to know what the goal is.

In describing the religious life of North African Jewry, Andre Chouraqui has noted that the Jews of the Maghreb valued saintliness as the ultimate quality.²⁰ They expected that their rabbis be well versed in Torah and rabbinic literature—but more than this, they expected them to be able to pray with sincerity and real devotion. By being in the presence of saintly teachers, the average people could be raised in their own spiritual life.

In summation, halakha is the ever-present link between God and the Jewish people. Through observance of halakha in the spirit of humility, the Jew has the opportunity to live life on a deep spiritual level.

NOTES

1. *Mikhmanei Uziel*, Tel Aviv, 1939, p. 358.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 371.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 376.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 382.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 391.
6. This material is drawn from my article, "A Sephardic Approach to Halakha," *Midstream*, August/September 1975, pp. 66-69.
7. The travel account is found in J. D. Eisenstein, *Ozar HaMasaot*, Tel Aviv, 1969. See page 241.
8. Alan Watts, *The Supreme Identity*, New York, 1972, p. 128.
9. Andre Chouraqui, *Between East and West*, Philadelphia, 1968, p. 61.
10. London, 1969, pp. 128f.
11. *Mikhmanei Uziel*, p. 407.
12. The text of this contract is found in Yehoshua Benveniste, *Sha'ar Yehoshua*, Husiatyn, 1904, no. 2.
13. Tam ben Yahya, *Tumat Yesharim*, Venice, 1622, no. 213, p.112b.
14. Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism* (second series), Philadelphia, 1908, p. 208.
15. Isidore Epstein, *The Responsa of Rabbi Simon Duran as a Source of History of the Jews of North Africa*, New York, 1968, pp. 58-59.
16. David Ibn Zimra, *Responsa*, New York, 5727, vol. 1, no. 308.
17. See his commentary on *Pirkei Avot*, p. 103b.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 97b.
19. Appendix A to Schechter's article, p. 292.
20. Chouraqui, p. 63. See also p. 71f, on the veneration of tombs.

What All Jews Can Learn From Great Sephardic Rabbis of Recent Centuries

ZVI ZOHAR

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To limit the study of Sephardic tradition to those of Sephardic ancestry is like limiting the study of Shakespeare to the English. Although persons born in the British Isles may rightfully take pride in their illustrious countryman, Shakespeare's genius is relevant to all people, and is not contingent upon his place of birth. So too, with regard to central values and religious orientations found in the writings of Sephardic rabbis of recent centuries: Their import extends beyond Sephardim by birth, to all Jews attempting to chart a course for a personal and communal life in which authentic Judaism and humanity go hand in hand.

In the following pages, I briefly set out examples of such Sephardic ideas and values, gleaned from over three decades of involvement in research of this field, that may be of interest to the readers of this journal—and to the Jewish community at large.

Tradition as Responsive to Change

Rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uzziel (1880–1953), born in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City, was Chief Rabbi of Jaffa-Tel Aviv from 1912 to

1939, and served as Chief Rabbi of Israel from 1939 until his death in 1953. In the introduction to the first volume of his halakhic Responsa, *Mishpetei Uzziel*, he writes:

In every generation, conditions of life, changes in values, and technical and scientific discoveries—create new questions and problems that require solution. We may not avert our eyes from these issues and say “Torah prohibits the New,” i.e., anything not expressly mentioned by earlier sages is ipso facto forbidden. *A fortiori*, we may not simply declare such matters permissible. Nor may we let them remain vague and unclear, each person acting with regard to them as he wishes. Rather, it is our duty to search halakhic sources, and to derive, from what they explicate, responses to currently moot issues. (All translations in this article are mine.)

Several significant points are contained in this brief passage. While Torah is eternal, its goal is not to create an existential bubble in which Jews conduct their lives detached from, and impervious to, the vicissitudes of contemporary human life. Rather, Jews must be sensitive to such changes, not only in science and technology but also in general conditions of life (e.g., social and ecological conditions) and in values held by human beings in their time. The attitude Jews should cultivate toward such changes should be neither one of passivity—simply swaying with the current of human affairs—nor of overall resistance. The phrase rabbi Uzziel uses to signify such resistance is noteworthy: “Torah prohibits the New.” This phrase, coined by Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1761–1839) was the slogan of nineteenth-century European Orthodoxy, and is a core value of contemporary right-wing Orthodoxy around the world. It identifies true commitment to Torah with powerful resistance to change. Rabbi Uzziel knew this full well—and deeply disagreed: Responsiveness always was, and must remain, a hallmark of Judaism. But such response should not be arbitrary nor Jewishly uninformed. Tradition in general, and the richness of halakhic texts in particular, can and should serve as a vast trove of resources for creative Jewish response to change.

Integration of Torah and General Learning

A necessary condition for a personal and communal life in which authentic Judaism and humanity go hand in hand is for a Jew to be intellectually at home in both Jewish and general knowledge. This is not a concession to the need to make a living, but an *a priori* religious and cultural ideal.

Rabbi Yitzhak Dayyan (1877–1964) was born in Aleppo, and later moved to Israel; he was considered the leading Aleppan-born rabbi of the twentieth century. In his essay *The Torah of Israel and the People of Israel* (Aleppo, 1923), he writes:

The first intellectuals [*maskilim*] in the period of the wise men of Spain realized and knew well the depth of the spirit of Judaism and its glorious power. The Torah and rational knowledge walked among them like twin sisters. And there was a true peace among their spiritual tendencies. And therefore in their wisdom and their intelligence they strengthened and validated the Torah and the tradition, and made them intellectually accessible.

Later in his essay, Rabbi Dayyan criticizes modern European *maskilim*, who felt that one must choose between modern culture and Judaism—and therefore severed their commitment to, and involvement with, traditional Jewish life and learning. In the paragraph cited above, Rabbi Dayyan presents two central characteristics of classic Jewish culture at its height in medieval times. One is more obvious: not a division of labor in which some Jews would be involved in Torah and others in human knowledge, but a situation in which (ideally) all Jews would be simultaneously involved in both. The other is less obvious: some versions of *Torah 'im derekh erets* (Torah with general knowledge) idealized a bifurcated Jew who was acquainted with both general and Jewish material, but whose Judaism remained “unsullied” by his exposure to non-Jewish sources. This is not the ideal outlined by Rabbi Dayyan; rather, the ideal Jew is a person who successfully integrates these two realms, as was done by the great rabbis of Spain’s golden age: “Torah and rational knowledge walked among them like twin sisters. And there was a true peace among their spiritual tendencies.”

Rabbi Joseph Hayyim of Baghdad (1835–1909), halakhist, kabbalist, poet, and (moderate) *maskil*, was the greatest scholar and religious leader of Iraqi Jewry in modern times. In 1903 he was invited to present the keynote address at the inauguration of a new building for an Alliance Israélite Universelle school in Baghdad. The central theme of his address was the ideal of a program of Jewish education in which children would be exposed simultaneously to both Jewish and general studies. Here are some excerpts:

[. . .] It is known that the good and appropriate time for a person to study is only when he is still of a young age, when the burden of his physical sustenance is not upon him, nor is he responsible for bearing the burden of

sustaining a wife and children. And by nature, his mind is clear and what he learns will be inscribed upon the tablet of his heart and will not budge. And therefore it is appropriate to deal with youth in their early years in both of these realms of learning: one, that of our Holy Torah, and one of *derekh erets*, that is, languages, writing and the like. And they should deal with them in both of these realms of study simultaneously, during their youth, when their mind is clear.

And it is with regard to this that the Tanna says in The Ethics of the Fathers (2:2): “Beautiful is the study of Torah with the way of the world, for the toil of them both causes sin to be forgotten,” that is, it is right and proper to be involved in both the study of Torah and of *derekh erets* at the same time, for the toil of both of them together causes sin to be forgotten—that is, the evil inclination found in the heart of humans because of our murky substance. Since his toil will be in the realms of the intellect, and therefore the evil that is within him will not move from potential to actual, to perform sinful acts.

And this is what the Bible alludes to “His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me” (*Shir haShirim* 2:6) [...] The realm of Torah is called “right” for it is strong and adept, while the realm of *derekh erets* that relates to this world is called “left” for it is the less dexterous. And thus he says “His left hand is under my head,” that is to say, the matters of *derekh erets* are under my head and I engage in them, and also “His right hand”—that is the realm of Torah—“doth embrace me,” that is, I engage in it at the same time that I engage in *derekh erets*, taking hold of both this and that simultaneously, for in such a manner a person sees blessing in his studies.

According to some views, the proper order of study for a Jew should be, first Torah and then—only after achieving mastery of Torah—secular studies. This of course relegates acquirement of general knowledge to a later period in one’s life, with the formative years being devoted to Torah alone—thereby ensuring that one’s character, values, and outlook will not be influenced by “alien” sources. Only when one is older and presumably irrevocably a “Torah-true” Jew may one be exposed to other sources of knowledge, which (hopefully) will by then be unable to do any harm.

The educational guidelines sketched by Rabbi Joseph Hayyim are quite different. In his view, it is specifically when the student is youngest and most impressionable that s/he should participate in a program of study that includes both Torah and general studies (*derekh erets*), for we are interested that both of these “will be inscribed upon the tablet of his heart.” In addition, it is not only Torah but also general studies—together and in tandem—that have a formative and corrective influence upon the

child's character: "it is right and proper to be involved in both the study of Torah and of *derekh erets* at the same time, for the toil of both of them together causes sin to be forgotten." The notion that the ideal Jewish person should be influenced by Torah alone is, therefore, mistaken.

Of special interest is the final paragraph cited from Rabbi Joseph Hayyim's address, in which he alludes to the Song of Songs. As is well known, there was opposition on the part of some ancient rabbis to include this deeply erotic text in the Bible; however, the view that finally prevailed was that of Rabbi Akiva and his peers, who identified the Song of Songs as expressing the intense relationship between God and the People of Israel. Thus, when Rabbi Joseph Hayyim quotes here from the Song of Songs, he is expressing a deep idea concerning a Jew's experience of the divine: Just as our acquaintance with God and our feelings of closeness and involvement with God are cultivated by study of Torah, so too should they cultivated by, and experienced through, our study of worldly knowledge. God is manifest both in Torah and in Creation, and only our experience of both of these simultaneously is an experience of God's full embrace: "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me."

Response to Secularization and Its Consequences

According to the sources we have seen above, the ideal is for a Jew to successfully integrate Jewish and general human influences upon his personal life and development. In all generations there were many who were unsuccessful at achieving this ideal. However, this has become increasingly so in recent centuries, as secularization has led to the divorce of religion from daily life. A major challenge facing Jews, and rabbinical leaders in particular, is how to relate to Jews who are alienated from traditional Jewish praxis and commitment. One mode of response, advocated by a leading faction in German Orthodoxy and followed (either in principle or in fact) by many committed European Orthodox Jews is to form congregations exclusively composed of fully observant individuals, thereby assuring that synagogue life will not be corrupted by the presence of secularized Jews. While continuing to assert that "a Jewish sinner is still a Jew" (*af 'al pi sheHatta, Yisrael hu*), the creation of such communities entailed a disassociation from the mass of non-observant Jews, and a *de facto* non-involvement in ensuring a Jewish future for themselves and their children.

This mode of response was not the one taken by leading Sephardic rabbis. Rabbi Ya'akov Mizrahi (1888–1948) was born in Beirut and educated in Damascus. In 1909 he emigrated to Argentina and served as a rabbi and educator affiliated with the Damascene Jewish émigré community in Buenos Aires until his death in 1948. The following quotation (from his collected oeuvre *veZarah Ya'akov*, Lydda 1994, *derush* 22) succinctly expresses a Sephardic rabbinic critique of the European Orthodox approach described above:

Even in a generation of Ba'al worship, in a time when "They do not know Me, says the Lord" and when "all are whores, a convention of traitors," even in such a generation, the prophet only *says* "might I leave my people and go from them, to be in a desert inn" (cf. Jeremiah ch. 9). But in fact, he does not leave his people, *has veHalila*, and does not walk away from them. He does not split off from the public, does not collect around him persons who are God-fearing and wise in their own eyes, *halila*. He does not establish for himself a separate congregation, saying "Peace will be mine" (cf. Deuteronomy 29:18). That is not the way of sincere, straight, devoted Judaism. Rather, that is a tactic of Galut [exile] that pollutes Israel (*'okher Yisrael*) and lengthens the Galut. Furthermore, we believe with a perfect belief, that the repair (*tikkun*) of our souls and of our spiritual level that has declined to the lowest rung, will not be achieved by splitting off, but rather by unity. The new generation, whom we see sinking into 49 gates of impurity while our eyes look on and long for them, will not be saved by (anyone) splitting off. They will not be brought under the wings of the Shekhina except by unity and drawing close: "I taught Ephraim to walk; I took them on My arms" (cf. Hosea 11:3).

In this remarkable passage, Rabbi Mizrahi relates to the topic at hand by referring to several biblical sources. Jeremiah was faced by a situation even more discouraging than that of rabbis in modern times: Not only were Jews abandoning God, they were actively betraying God by choosing alternate religions and other gods. But, however much Jeremiah was repelled and disgusted by the actions of these Jews, and however much he yearned to find solace in seclusion, he resisted that temptation. The phrase that Rabbi Mizrahi employs to describe those who succumb to such temptation is striking. He refers to them as saying "Peace will be mine," thus pointing the reader to Torah's description of a person who splits off from the Jewish people to do what he considers to be advantageous for himself as an individual, declaring "Peace will be mine, though I follow the hard-

ness of my heart” (Deuteronomy 29:18). According to Torah, such willful selfishness will not be overlooked by God:

(19) the Lord will not be willing to pardon him, but then the anger of the Lord and His jealousy shall be kindled against that man, and all the curse that is written in this book shall lie upon him, and the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven; (20) and the Lord shall separate him unto evil out of all the tribes of Israel, according to all the curses of the covenant that is written in this book of the law. (Deuteronomy 29)

In the case at hand, the selfishness of these persons is a religious one: They are out to enjoy a *frum* communal milieu, unencumbered by the irritating presence of sinners or slackers. Rabbi Mizrahi does not see this as qualitatively different from other manifestations of selfishness. If the ideal path for a human being is, as Maimonides taught us, *imitatio Dei*, then we must seek to act in the manner God is described as acting. The prophet Hosea states that the Israelites “sacrificed unto the Ba’alim, and offered to graven images” (Hosea 11:2). God’s response (as quoted by Rabbi Mizrahi, above) was: “I taught Ephraim to walk; I took them on My arms,” that is, God sought to guide those who strayed into sin by taking them upon His arms and providing close, personal guidance for them. Indeed, in the next verse (Hosea 11:4) God goes on to say: “I shall draw them with cords of a man, with bands of love.” The conclusion drawn by Rabbi Mizrahi is, that true care for the future of Judaism should be expressed by inclusiveness and care for all Jews: “The new generation . . . will not be saved by (anyone) splitting off. They will not be brought under the wings of the Shekhina except by unity and drawing close.” In the following sections we will see how this ideal was manifested in halakhic decisions by two leading Sephardic rabbis of the twentieth century.

“Great Is Peace”: Rabbi Joseph Mesas Responds to Widespread Secularization in North Africa

Rabbi Joseph Mesas (1892–1974) was one of the greatest and most creative halakhic decisors of the twentieth century. In 1939, the following question was addressed to him by the rabbi of Port Lyautey, Morocco (*Otzar haMikhtavim*, vol. II, #1302):

Many of the *amei haAretz* publicly desecrate the Sabbath, some in order to

make a living. But there are also rich people who have been accustomed to this from their youth. However, they all believe in God, and perform philanthropic mitzvot. Does their touch render wine prohibited?

This question reveals the inaccuracy of the view that North African Jewry was religiously observant until the mass migration to Israel and to Europe. Even before World War II, a significant sector of Moroccan Jewry was working on Shabbat or otherwise publically performing acts absolutely forbidden by halakha. Some justified this by the need to make a living; others had been accustomed to such behavior from their childhood and thus saw no need to justify it. According to classic halakha, Jews who publically desecrate the Shabbat are considered as if they are Gentiles. Also according to classic halakha, wine touched by a Gentile is considered *unkosher*. If so, wine touched by a Jew who is “as if” a Gentile—is *unkosher*. However, in the case at hand, these same Jews declare their belief in God, identify as Jews, and are supportive of fellow Jews who are in need. How, then, should we relate to them—*qua* “as-if” Gentiles or *qua* fellow Jews?

Rabbi Mesas surveyed the halakhic literature and concluded that it clearly determines what status should be accorded to public desecrators of the Shabbat: they are as-if Gentiles, and therefore “according to the law as it stands, there is no permission for wine they touch.” One would expect that these words would be the bottom line of his ruling; but they are not. Rabbi Mesas proceeds to write:

But, we can mend their situation on the basis of another consideration, namely: Because of our many sins that prolong our exile, the *amei haAretz* who desecrate God's Sabbath and Holidays are numerous. Most of our give and take is with them, and they are in continuous social contact with us: they enter our homes, and we enter theirs. And there is not one banquet, whether mandatory or optional, in which we do not sit with them, in their own homes, such as *Zeved haBat*, circumcision, redemption of the first born, marriages, and so forth.

So, if we came to forbid wine they have touched, by even the slightest gesture or hint, we would rapidly become involved in conflict and would fan the flames of controversy to the heart of the heavens. By doing so we would be causing ourselves great injury, through their enmity and hatred; and it is possible that as a result they would spurn even the few commandments that they do fulfill, and totally reject everything, God forbid.

Despite the (mis)behavior of these persons with regard to the norms of Shabbat, they and the observers of Shabbat constitute one interactive community. This is evident in the ongoing joint participation of Jews, whose level of observance varies radically, in all manner of social events, many of which are of a religious or quasi-religious character. Such mutuality is of course contingent upon the recognition that all participants are equally Jewish. Following the halakha that defines many of the participants as “as-if” Jews would, of course, bring the ongoing conviviality to an abrupt end. Both “sides” would suffer: the Sabbath-observers would be regarded with hate and enmity by those they had stigmatized, and the desecrators of Shabbat would now distance themselves from tradition and cease observance even of those few mitzvot that they had until then been observing. One might say: “Well, if that is what halakha requires, then—that is what religious Jews must do, whatever the consequences!” But Rabbi Mesas holds otherwise:

Therefore, it is right to be lenient in this matter, even for the sake of Peace alone, whose power is great. For, for the sake of Peace they [i.e., the rabbis, Hazal] permitted the performance of acts that are rabbinic prohibitions, and the non-performance of acts mandated by positive commandments of the Torah [see: *S’deh Hemed*, *Pe’at HaSadeh*, section Gimmel, paragraph 36]. This is all the more so with respect to this prohibition, which is quite light, for even the Christians and Muslims of our time are not worshippers of other gods, and therefore if they accidentally touch our wine it is permitted even for drinking [as our teacher, Rabbi Joseph Caro, wrote in *Yoreh De’ah* section 124 clause 7].

For these reasons, we are lenient, and permit them to be called up to the Torah, and to read the Haftarah, and we count them for a minyan and for all other ritual matters.

According to Rabbi Mesas (and a good many other rabbis), when halakha instructs us to follow a certain norm, this should always be understood as saying: “Do X—barring other weighty constraints.” Thus, while there is a rule instructing us to regard those who publically desecrate the Shabbat as if they are Gentiles—in the case at hand there is another extremely weighty counter-indication: the disruption and uprooting of intra-Jewish peace. The preservation and cultivation of peace is a major and high-ranking value in the eyes of Torah—so much so, that when observance of other halakhic norms might conflict with the preservation

of peace, the observance of those other norms should, in most instances, be suspended. So it is with regard to all norms of rabbinic origin (*de-rabbanan*): If I am commanded by rabbinic law to perform a certain act, or if I am forbidden by the rabbis to perform some act, and compliance with that rabbinic law will entail a disruption of the public peace—I must (in this instance) disregard the rabbinic norm. Thus, if there is, for example, some food that is unkosher *de-rabbanan* but my refusal to eat it will impair the communal peace—I must eat that food. Similarly, if Torah law itself commands me to perform a certain act (*mitzvat 'aseh*), but performing that mitzvah will disrupt the peace—I must (in this instance) refrain from performing that commandment. Only with regard to an act that is prohibited by Torah (*mitzvat lo ta'aseh deOraita*) is this not so: Even at the cost of disrupting the peace, I may not perform an act forbidden by Torah.

To ostracize a Jew for publically desecrating the Shabbat is not a Torah prohibition, and therefore, it is trumped by the mitzvah of preserving and cultivating peace between all Jews, whatever their degree of observance. This, Rabbi Mesas concludes, applies not only to their wine, but to their participation in all other realms of religious life from which they would have been excluded by an “as-if-Gentile” status: “For these reasons, we are lenient, and permit them to be called up to the Torah, and to read the Haftarah, and we count them for a minyan and for all other ritual matters.”

This inclusive attitude is manifest—and even broadened—in the following case, which was dealt with by Rabbi Moshe haCohen Dreihem.

The Broader Bounds of Inclusivity: Accepting a Convert Who Will Be Non-Observant, for the Sake of a Jew and His Non-Jewish Descendants

Rabbi Moshe haCohen (1906–1966) was born into the Jewish community on the island of Djerba in Tunisia and there received his religious education; to differentiate between him and other contemporaries of a similar name, he received the additional surname “Dreihem.” He became the chief rabbi of the “small quarter” of the island and head of its yeshiva, and was considered one of the leading scholars of this special community. In 1958 he immigrated to Israel and was appointed a member of the rabbinical court in Tiberius, and in that capacity he became aware of a major historical and social issue requiring rabbinical attention:

Many Jews married Gentile women after the Second World War and have fathered sons and daughters with them. According to the law, the children's status follows that of their Gentile mother [i.e. they are not Jewish]. When they come to Israel, the husband brings the children [to the court] for *giyyur*, sometimes with their mother and sometimes on their own. The trouble is that they reside in places in which the people do not observe the tradition: they eat forbidden foods and desecrate the Sabbath and the holidays. It is clear that after *giyyur* they will behave similarly to the Jews among whom they live, since it is almost impossible for them to be observant. (*Responsa Veheshiv Moshe*, Tiberias, 1968, #51)

According to the *Shulhan Arukh*, one of the stages of *giyyur* is “acceptance of the commandments” (*kabbalat haMitzvot*), and a widely held halakhic opinion with which Rabbi haCohen was familiar held that there is a clear contradiction between “acceptance of the commandments” and intention to violate them. In fact, a *Beraita* cited in the Talmud indicates that a gentile should not be accepted for *giyyur* if he specifically rejects even one halakhic norm. How, then, could rabbis accept a candidate for *giyyur* whom they knew would almost certainly lead a secular life? Researching this halakhic issue, Rabbi haCohen reached what he considered to be a better overall interpretation of the primary sources, concerning the core requirements of a halakhic *giyyur*.

One such requirement is, that a proselyte “accept the commandments.” Based upon painstaking analysis of the sources, R. haCohen wrote:

The requirement of *kabbalat mitzvot* does not mean that he commits himself to observe all the *mitzvot*; rather, that he accepts the commandments of the Torah with the awareness that if he violates some of them, he will be punished accordingly. Thus, although subsequently [after the *giyyur*] he violates some of the commandments of the Torah, this does not impugn his acceptance of the yoke of mitzvot [*kabbalat 'ol mitzvot*], for “even though he sinned, he is a Jew.” Indeed, even if at the moment that he accepts the mitzvot he intends to violate some of them, he did accept them—on the knowledge that if he transgresses, he may be punished. Therefore, he is a good, fine *ger*.

The halakhic requirement that a convert “accept the burden of the commandments” means that the candidate is required to recognize that as a Jew he will be subject to the system of halakha, and is prepared to accept

the consequences of non-compliance. The halakhic duty of the court is to ascertain the potential convert's awareness of the system of halakha, rather than his intent to follow its rules. That having been determined, the following question arose: If halakha does not make *giyyur* conditional upon the convert's intention to fulfill all the commandments, is there some other intention that halakha poses as a condition for accepting a Gentile into the process of *giyyur*?

Rabbi haCohen's answer was positive: accepting a person for *giyyur* is conditional upon the existence of a real intention to become part of the Jewish people. Such intention becomes apparent if, after the *giyyur*, the proselyte follows a lifestyle that—in the context of his time and place—marks him/her as a Jew. Rabbi haCohen's assessment of the lifestyle normally led by secular Jews in the Israel was that they indeed behaved in ways that were markedly Jewish. He therefore ruled that according to halakha, the children and spouses of secular Jews in Israel may unhesitatingly be accepted for *giyyur*—even if afterward the family will continue to live in a secular neighborhood, to send its children to secular schools, and to lead a Jewish-Israeli-secular lifestyle.

But, one might well ask: What good would be achieved by transforming Gentiles into secular Jews? Rabbi haCohen sets forth the relevant considerations clearly and unequivocally:

They [the Gentile woman and her children by the Jewish man] should be accepted for *giyyur* to save the man from a more grievous offence [i.e. intermarriage] that according to ancient tradition is punishable by *karet*, and that makes one liable to attack by zealots. And also, [such acceptance would] save the children who will be born to them as well as to accept for *giyyur* the children they already have, to bring the whole family under the wings of the Shekhinah [Divine Presence], “that none of us be banished” (2 Samuel 14:14).

In the case of intermarriage, the values of communal solidarity should lead rabbis to follow the path of inclusivity with regard to the Jewish spouse: By accepting his wife (or her husband) for *giyyur*, the Jewish partner is being rescued from a serious state of sin.

Furthermore, this inclusive imperative extends not only toward the couple, but also toward their children. This is clearly the case with regard to the children of a Gentile father and a Jewish mother, who are halakhically Jewish. However, Rabbi haCohen extends this imperative also

toward the children of a Jewish father and a Gentile mother, who, from a formal halakhic point of view, are not Jews. Rabbi haCohen justifies concern for their future by referring to the biblical phrase “that none of us be banished.” In post-talmudic sources, this phrase is employed to convey several meanings. With regard to the Jewish community, it expresses the duty of rabbis and leaders not to treat sinners and social deviants in a manner that will cause them and their descendants to be severed from the community, but rather to mend a breach in the correct order of reality by an act of inclusion. With regard to *giyyur* its implication is that according to the underlying principles of Torah, it is right and proper to utilize *giyyur* in order to include persons of Jewish descent into the community, even though they are not halakhically Jewish. Rabbi haCohen’s position thus reflects an over-arching perspective regarding the extension of the group toward whom rabbis bear responsibility. This group includes not only those who are halakhically Jewish but also other descendents of Jews.

Conclusion

At the outset of this article, I set out to provide examples of Sephardic ideas and values that could be of benefit to all Jews attempting to chart a course for a personal and communal life in which authentic Judaism and humanity go hand in hand. The examples I focused on included the ideal of tradition as responsive to change; the view that integration of Torah and general learning is a major religious ideal; and the value of response to secularization not by separatism but rather by maintenance of communal unity. The ideal of communal inclusiveness and its halakhic implications for rabbis and leaders was illustrated by two examples: inclusiveness toward public desecrators of Shabbat in order to preserve peaceful interaction and relations within one diverse Jewish community; and inclusiveness toward intermarried secular Jews and their children by accepting their spouses and children for *giyyur*. It is hard to overstate the implications for the entire fabric of contemporary Jewish life, if these values and policies upheld by great Sephardic rabbis were to be actually accepted and applied within Orthodox and halakhic Judaism.

The Idealist and the Pragmatist: Rav Benzion Uziel and Rav Ovadia Yosef

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Rav Benzion Meir Hai Uziel (1880–1953) and Rav Ovadia Yosef (b. 1920) are two towering figures of the twentieth-century Sephardic rabbinical world. They seem to share much in common: Both are tremendous *talmidei hahamim*; both are prolific authors of halakhic Responsa; and both held the position of *Rishon leZion*—the Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel. Yet a closer look at their worldviews marks a sharp distinction in two important areas: 1) the definition of a posek (rabbinic decisor of Jewish law), and 2) the Sephardi-Ashkenazi divide.

In 1934, Rav Uziel delivered an address entitled “The Posek in Israel.” He opened with the following statement:

The posek in Israel is not he who knows the laws of what is forbidden and what is permitted (*Issur veHeter*), what is impure and what is pure, or the financial laws governing relationships between man and his fellow man. One who knows such laws is not a posek; rather he holds a much more modest title of *talmid haham* (rabbinic scholar).

Rather, the posek in Israel is the Grand Bet Din (*Bet Din haGadol*), the chief legislative body that sits on *Lishkat haGazit* in the Temple in Jerusalem, from which comes halakhic rulings for the entire Jewish people.

The vision behind Rav Uziel's words is that the ultimate posek in Israel is not the individual rabbi who gives rulings on a case-by-case basis, but rather the *Bet Din haGadol*, which has the power to rule on behalf of the whole Jewish people. To Rav Uziel, individual matters such as kashruth or ritual purity affect only the individual, but the grander scale halakhic issues that the *Bet Din haGadol* may rule on (such as civil law or homicide) have an effect on the entire Jewish nation. When Rav Uziel heard the word "posek," what came to his mind was a "Supreme Court of the Jewish People" that had a potentially unifying effect for all of Am Yisrael, especially in the land of Israel.

Just 19 years later in 1953, a young Rav Ovadia Yosef published the first volume of his rabbinic Responsa, *Yabia Omer*. In his introduction, he takes an almost opposite point of view to that of Rav Uziel:

The main purpose of Torah study is *pesak halakha* (halakhic ruling). Therefore, [one's] main course of study should be *Orah Haim* (daily, Shabbat, and holiday laws) and *Yoreh Deah* (the laws of *Issur veHeter*).

Nowhere does Rav Ovadia even mention the *Bet Din haGadol* or anything like it. Instead, he sees the halakhic rulings in the private domain as the ultimate expression of a posek in Israel.

In a letter to a rabbinic colleague addressing the different modes of *pesak halakha* from different countries, Rav Uziel wrote:

I do not relate to any distinctions or separations between Sephardim and Ashkenazim. It is not the countries of Spain (Sepharad) or Germany (Ashkenaz) that gave us great Torah scholars, rather the Torah itself—regardless of locale—that has inspired generation after generation of Torah learning. I believe in the unity of our people, and I reject divisions along ethnic lines. Our return to *Erets Yisrael* is our new era of unity, where the traditions of the Diaspora are creatively blended to form a new generation of Jews.

Rav Ovadia Yosef sees things differently. He insists on the restoration of the dominance of the halakha according to the Sephardic minhag in Israel. Rav Ovadia does not want equality with the Ashkenazim; he wants full dominance of the Sephardic minhag. In *Yabia Omer*, he actually levels a veiled criticism of his predecessor Rav Uziel:

It is known that the Sephardic chief rabbis before me were subordinated to their colleagues, the Ashkenazic rabbis. And for the sake of peace, they said

nothing. But I, who am not subordinate, thank God, will uphold my mission that the ruling of Maran (Rabbi Yosef Karo) be adopted.

I believe that the different worldviews of Rav Uziel and Rav Yosef—in both areas—are attributable to one factor: the eras in which they lived in Israel and served as Chief Rabbis.

Rav Uziel lived during the Yishuv in Palestine. He was a fervent Zionist who fully identified with Religious Zionism, and saw the re-establishment of the Jewish State as a sign from God, and as an opportunity to create something new—a unified Jewish people. It was a Sanhedrin—not the individual rabbi—that would bring about halakhic unity to the Jewish state. With the Jewish people coming back to their land from all over the world, Diaspora concepts such as “Sephardi” and “Ashkenazi” would be replaced by a unified Jewish people in their common ancestral homeland.

Rav Uziel lived in an age of building and re-building, of new and renewed ideas. He was a true idealist. He did live to see the establishment of the State of Israel, but died in 1953, a mere five years into the State’s existence.

Rav Ovadia Yosef grew up in the State of Israel, with all of its complexities, social gaps, and socioeconomic/ethnic divisions. By the time he became Chief Rabbi in 1973, Rav Ovadia viewed his post as an opportunity to restore pride to Sephardim who had been suppressed in Israeli society, primarily by the elitist secular Labor Party political establishment. In the reality he faced, there would be no chance to create a grand halakhic body like the Sanhedrin, so he preferred for a posek to return to his traditional Diaspora role of rulings in the private domain. Given the deep social gap that existed between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, he could not see “unifying” halakha between them; quite the contrary, he saw this as an opportunity for something Sephardic—in this case halakha—to finally take precedence over something Ashkenazic.

Whose legacy do we wish to carry forward?

I grew up kissing the hand of Rav Ovadia Yosef, studying his books, and revering him as Israel’s Chief Rabbi. I think he did what he had to do with great wisdom, and he is arguably the twentieth century’s greatest *talmid haham* and posek. Unfortunately, his plan took a turn into politics, and with Shas, the results are simply miserable—for Sephardim, and for Am Yisrael.

It’s time for us to go back to dreaming Rav Uziel’s big dreams.

A Story of *Obs* and *Abs*

ISAAC SASSOON

(Hakham Isaac S. D. Sassoon is a rabbi and educator, and a founding faculty member of the Institute of Traditional Judaism. Born in England, his initial education was under the tutelage of his father, Rabbi Solomon Sassoon, Hakham Yosef Doury, and others. Later studies were at Gateshead Yeshiva and various yeshivot in Israel. He holds a Ph.D. in Literature from the University of Lisbon. He has published on topics ranging from Scriptural commentary and history, to issues of current concern to the Jewish community.)

Maimonides [*Yad Tefillah* 8:12, 15:1], as well as several other Sephardic scholars, [declares] to be ‘*illegin*’ (=defective of speech) [those] people who cannot distinguish between the sounds of *aleph* and *ayin* or between the sounds of *heh* and *heth*. These alone they declare ‘*illegin*’. But our Talmudic sages, when they cited these two pairs of easily confounded gutturals, were citing them merely as examples as is shown by their use of the word *kegon* (=such as)—a word which always implies that what has been mentioned represents a larger group.¹ Hence I am amazed at their [i.e. Maimonides and the Sephardic scholars] singling out for the epithet ‘*illegin*’ just those who fail to distinguish between *aleph* and *ayin*, etc. but forget to apply it to themselves and their countrymen who make no difference between the sounds of *samekh* and *tsadi*. Moreover, when it comes to the diacritics—which are to the letters like brains and legs [to humans]—they do not respect each diacritic’s phonetic value. Instead, *kamets* and *patah* are all one to them as are *tsere* and *segol*. . . . All this happened to them because they fulfilled the verse [Ps. 106:35] “They intermingled with the nations and learnt their ways.” Having resolved to aggrandize themselves above their fellows, they made every effort to gain admission into royal and princely courts. And the better to ingratiate themselves with the princes, they took up the study of these uncircumcised princes’ tongue, script, astronomy [or science], and philosophy. . . . Furthermore, they sought to bring their own language [Hebrew] into line with the language of the uncircumcised by retaining

only those five of our vowel sounds that correspond to the latter language's vowels while doing away with all the rest. Misguidedly the [Sephardic] multitude followed their lead until in time all but the five vowel sounds were lost to those communities. Another consequence of the philosophical studies was—for our sins—the proliferation of heretics in Israel.¹

The above diatribe leveled against what we think of as Sephardic pronunciation came from the pen of Asher Lemlein ben Meir Reutlingen. This all but forgotten visionary—a messiah to some—appeared on the scene on Izola in Istria at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Contemporaries, both Jewish and Christian, recall 1502 as the “year of penance” when masses of Jews divested themselves of their worldly possessions in preparation for what Asher Lemlein had led them to believe was their imminent redemption.

Ephraim Kupfer who published the surviving writings of Asher Reutlingen,³ quotes several such reports and assessments of Asher's impact, by chroniclers both contemporary and slightly later—including Abraham Farissol (d. 1525). In his book *Magen Abraham*, Farissol writes:

In these regions of Italy, in the Venetian domains⁴ there arose a man of stature⁵ from the ranks of Ashkenaz by the name of Asher Lemle.⁶ He put on airs of being a king despite his limited wisdom and deeds. Through the mediation of his disciples he misled the entire region [into believing that] the redeemer is coming. Indeed, to the multitudes he would announce that “he [the redeemer] is already here.” From his place of seclusion he let most of the Diaspora come to believe in him, his teachings, the fasts and flagellations; for they said “the redeemer is here!”—until it all ended in “emptiness and chasing the wind.” These events played out before me in the year 262 [1502] here Ferrara where I reside.⁷

A generation later the historian Joseph haKohen (d. 1577) records in his *Emeq haBakhah*:

In Istria, which is near Venice, there arose an Ashkenazic Jew by the name of Lemlin—a fool of a prophet a madman in spirit.⁸ Jews flocked to him saying “he is surely a prophet since God has sent him to lead His people Israel and to ingather the scattered of Judah from the four corners of the earth.” Even among the rabbis he had some followers. They called for fasting, wearing of sackcloth, and for everyone to repent of their bad ways; for they said “Our redemption is close at hand.” (Toronto edition [1922] p. 128)

The recollections of David Gans (d. 1613) are charming—if second-hand:

Rabbi Lemlin announced the coming of the messiah in the year 260 [1500]. Throughout the dispersions of Israel they believed his words. Even among the gentiles his fame grew and many of them also believed his words. My grandfather Seligman Gans of blessed memory smashed the oven he kept for baking *massoth* in his total confidence that the following Passover he would be baking *massoth* in the Holy Land. I myself heard from the venerable Rabbi Eliezer Trevis, head of the Francfort beth din, that it was no trifling matter⁹—[Asher] having provided signs to prove it. He [R. Trevis] added “perhaps our sins were the cause of its failure.” (*Zemah David*, first edition 1592; annotated edition by Mordechai Breuer, Jerusalem [1983] p. 137)

Lastly, the remarks that the Christian protagonist addresses to his Jewish counterpart in *haVikuah* by the famous Hebraist Sebastian Münster (d. 1552):

In the year 262 [1502] Jews did penance wherever they lived in all lands throughout the diaspora in expectation of messiah.¹⁰ It continued for almost a full year; young and old, children and women. Never had such penance been done as was done in those days.¹¹

Asher Lemlein is certainly fascinating in his own right; but our present interest is his conviction that seven diacritic signs must represent an equal number of distinct vowel sounds. Fewer sounds than signs made no sense to Asher. His logic seems perfectly cogent, and was to be echoed by other worthies until the dawn of the modern age. As late as the second half of the eighteenth century, R. Jacob Emden (d. 1776) was faulting the Sephardic vowel system:

[W]ith regard to the pronunciation of the vowels, happy are we [Ashkenazim] and goodly is our portion unlike the Sephardim who do not distinguish between *kamets* and *patah*, thus making the holy profane¹². . . . In addition to that, they diminish the number of the vowels which were handed down to us from Sinai. . . . They do the same with the vowels *segol* and *tsere*, making the pronunciation of both alike.¹³

Emden’s allusion to the vowels’ Sinaitic origin is cryptic; but almost certainly harks back to a talmudic passage in *Nedarim* 37b.

What is the interpretation of the verse “They read in the scroll of (var. in)¹⁴ the Torah of clearly they made its sense plain and gave instruction¹⁵ about

what was read” [Neh 8:8]? “They read in the scroll of the Torah of God” this refers to Scripture proper; “clearly” refers to Targum [=Aramaic translation]; “they made its sense plain” refers to the division of the text into verses; “and gave instruction about what was read” refers to the cantillation—or, according to others, to the *masorot*. R. Isaac said: The reading of the Scribes, the embellishments of the Scribes, words read but not written or written but not read are all *halakhah le-moshe mi-sinai*.¹⁶ Examples of “readings of the Scribes” are the two ways of pronouncing the consonantal word spelt *aleph resh tsadi* [=earth, land]. Also, the consonantal word spelt *shin mem yod final-mem* [=sky, heaven] and the word spelt *mem tsadi resh final-mem* [=Egypt].¹⁷

Although R. Isaac obviously attaches the highest importance to giving each vowel its proper phonetic value, he says nothing about seven vowel sounds—let alone any diacritical sigla. Nevertheless, both R. Emden and Asher Lemlein, the former explicitly, assume the seven diacritics along with their respective values to be ancient, if not coeval with the biblical text itself. Nor were these teachers alone in that assumption. Indeed, some Sephardim showed symptoms of an inferiority complex on account of their indifference to the *kamets*! For example, R. David Ibn Yahia (d. 1528) makes the following confession: “Know that we [Sephardim] have lost the proper way to read written texts. . . . We do not differentiate between *kamets* and *patah* nor between *tsere* and *segol*. . . . Undoubtedly each consonant and each vowel must have its discrete sound. . . .”¹⁸ Even today one occasionally hears the argument that neglecting to differentiate between *patah* and *kamets* or *segol* and *tsere* must surely be a deviation from what was intended by the tradition that instituted these distinct sigla. For the sake of full disclosure, I own up to my own bewilderment regarding this seeming anomaly of having two distinct “squiggles” to represent one and the same sound. When I finally mustered the courage to ask my father, he proceeded to show me a text with supralinear Babylonian vocalization. Today, he said, we know that the Babylonian system of vocalization differed radically from the Tiberian, and certainly did not assign distinct values to *tsere* and *segol*—and possibly not even to *patah* and *kamets*.¹⁸ However, the Tiberian system won the day and ousted the Babylonian—at any rate among scribes and writers of vocalized Hebrew. But not in the mouths of entire communities who retained their erstwhile pronunciation, either through inertia or in conscious defiance of the “officially” sanctioned system.

My father's answer was no more than a distillation of a century of discovery and scholarship that has identified not merely two but three historical systems of vocalization. Some of the most accessible scholarship in the field can be found in the writings of pioneers such as Benjamin Klar (d. 1948), Paul Kahle (d. 1964), Yehiel F. Gumpertz and in the ongoing research of Israel Yeivin and others. These are some of the primary scholars whose conclusions we shall now summarize, paraphrase and/or cite.

Benjamin Klar

From the very beginning of the enterprise of vocalizing the sacred texts—i.e., from the Gaonic age—there existed three distinct systems. . . . It is premature to say what the historical relationship between the three systems might have been. But it would not be unreasonable to conjecture that the so-called “Egyptian-Sephardic” pronunciation was the most ancient since it is attested in the transcriptions of the Septuagint as well as Josephus.²⁰ If so, the Tiberian and Babylonian systems must be due to later influences. It is worth noting comparable phonetic developments in Persian where the long ‘a’ sound mutated into a Swedish ‘ä’.²¹

Paul Kahle

When in the course of the ninth century the Masoretes of Tiberias began their work of adding a consistent punctuation to the text of the Hebrew Bible, they were convinced that it was their duty to give the text of the Bible as correct a form as possible. . . . They secured the abolition or adaptation of all the texts provided with a different kind of punctuation such as the Babylonian. . . . The text fixed by the Masoretes has been almost the only one considered in the preparation of our Hebrew grammars. Now we know this text was altered by the Masoretes. I have tried to show that the Masoretes of Tiberias introduced a number of new vowels to safeguard the newly-established pronunciation of the gutturals.²²

Yisrael Yeivin

The well known report in *Mahzor Vitry* regarding the existence of three systems of pronunciation appears to be taken from a compilation by the

twelfth century R. Jacob bar Samson. That report, found in the commentary to Pirke Avoth, reads: 'Therefore Tiberian punctuation differs from our punctuation, and both differ from the punctuation of the Holy Land.'²³ M. Friedlander thought that 'our punctuation' referred to the Babylonian system. To the objection that a 12th century Frenchman was unlikely to identify his group as Babylonian, Friedlander responded that Vitry's commentary to Pirke Avoth was a miscellany of material borrowed from a variety of sources, including Gaonic, which the compiler incorporated as he found it. Nehemiah Aloni rejected Friedlander's theory, preferring to understand 'our punctuation' as referring to the 'expanded' Tiberian punctuation. . . . If so, Vitry cannot be counted as a witness to Babylonian vocalization.²⁴

All agree, then, that the system we are most familiar with, originated in Tiberias and comprised seven diacritics. The system that developed in Babylonia probably had no more than six. A third system, often referred to as the vocalization of *Erets Yisrael*, seems to have had just five. Although the Tiberian system with its seven sigla ultimately prevailed, not all communities renounced their traditional way of pronouncing Hebrew. This can be demonstrated in a number of ways. For instance, a plethora of extant manuscripts can be seen to disregard the quintessentially Tiberian vowel distinctions; interchanging *kamets* with *patah* and *sere* with *segol*. Many of these old manuscripts would have shocked the messiah of Istria because they hail from the very heartlands of Ashkenaz.

Yes indeed! Careful study by scholars, notably Hanokh Yalon (d. 1970),²⁵ of early French and German manuscripts showed that their writers, too, were pronouncing *kamets* the same as *patah*. Take for example the comments of Rashi (d. 1105) to the "Earth, Heaven, Egypt" passage at Ned. 37b (cited above). Since the Talmud is typically written without *matres lectionis*, Rashi sets out to describe in his own words the sound of nouns such as ERETS (=earth) and their pausal modifications. "It is the "readings of the Scribes" that fixes the two ways of pronouncing the consonantal word spelt *aleph resh tsadi*. For there is no *yod* between the *aleph* and *resh* nor between *resh* and *tsadi* [to fix the pronunciation as ERETS]. Similarly for the pausal form, there is no second *aleph* or *heh* between the *aleph* and *resh* nor is there a *yod* between *resh* and *tsadi* [to fix the pronunciation as ARETS]." By explaining that the pausal is pronounced as if there were a *mater lectionis* *aleph* or *heh* between the initial consonantal *aleph* and the *resh*, Rashi reveals that the *kamets* was just like *patah* in his own system of pronunciation.²⁶

Another important proof is furnished by transcriptions of Hebrew in European alphabets. In 1273 R. Abraham Ibn Ezra's astrological treatise *Reshit Hokhmah* was translated into French.²⁷ Yehiel F. Gumpertz in his *Mivta'e Sefatenu* (Jerusalem 1953) analyzed the transliterated Hebrew words in this thirteenth-century Old French text. Gumpertz begins by telling us that the Hebrew (and Arabic) words were dictated to the scribe Oders de Mondidier by Hagin the Jew. The latter could not write French and the former knew no Hebrew (or Arabic). "The first thing to emerge [from my study of this text]," Gumpertz continues,

was a total and unqualified confirmation of Hanoch Yalon's theory regarding the "Sephardic" pronunciation of the *kamets* by French Jews. Indeed so "Sephardi" are his transcriptions that I began to suspect Hagin to be an Iberian Jew. However, his non-Sephardic origin was soon revealed in the way he represents *shevas* and *hatafs*, no less than in his transcriptions. For instance, the Hebrew word for myrtle he gives as *hedas* instead of *hadas*. *Hedas* is attested exclusively in non-Sephardic MSS of the period. (Gumpertz, *ibid.*)

A third clue comes from rhymed Hebrew compositions by early French and German versifiers. Very frequently *kamets* and *patah* words are used to form the rhymes, strongly suggesting that the rhymsters treated them as homophonous.

But to gain a fuller picture of Ashkenazic pronunciation and its evolution, we turn now to—of all unlikely linguists—Max Weinreich. Weinreich's Yiddish researches necessitated a thorough understanding of the kinds of Hebrew that fed Yiddish at its various stages. Not only did Weinreich (d. 1969) master the evidence available in his day, but he managed to present it in a manner succinct as it is orderly. Indeed, we cannot do better than quote him in extenso.

Up to a hundred years ago, not only the reading of the Bible, but all of Hebrew grammar was based on the Tiberian tradition. There are statements of medieval authors that the pronunciation, along with the text of the Torah, were given on Mount Sinai. Aharon Ben Asher [early 10th century] himself maintained that punctuation derived from the men of the great assembly, namely from the beginning of the second Temple. Still others, more critical, came to the conclusion that Hebrew speakers in the period of unmediatedness needed no punctuation. . . . The Tiberian punctuation was created with the conscious aim of teaching correct reading at a time when

Hebrew had long ceased to be an unmediated language. . . . Scholars can now declare with sufficient confidence that of the three attempts to elaborate a punctuation, the Tiberian attempt was the most recent. The Babylonian system apparently came into use around the year 600, the southern Palestinian²⁸ about 700, that is some 50 years before the work of the Tiberian sages had begun. . . .

Behind the north Palestinian punctuation there was an inventory of seven vowels whereas the southern Palestinian punctuation has an inventory of only five vowels. One fact is striking; this vowel system is similar to what was later called the Sephardic pronunciation. . . . From southern Palestine and Egypt it [the five vowel system] penetrated all of northern Africa and even the Iberian Peninsula. The centre of learning in Kairwan was also a point of supply of Jewishness to Italy. . . . From there it passed into Loter-Ashkenaz. . . . It was one exclusive Western sphere, from southern Palestine to the Atlantic, from the edge of the Sahara to the northernmost settlements in central Europe. The southwestern sphere retained the five-vowel reading system [while] the northwest, that is, central Europe, was pervaded by the Tiberian; through conscious efforts of the adherents of this system there grew up here what is known as the Ashkenazic pronunciation. . . . The similarity of the pre-Ashkenazic pronunciation in Ashkenaz to the Sephardic pronunciation was not the result of the influence of Sefarad on Ashkenaz. There was no such influence, but both Sefarad and Ashkenaz drew their spiritual sustenance from one pre-European source. Sefarad clung to the old system; Ashkenaz changed its reading system radically and the break came not because the scholars of Ashkenaz created the Ashkenazic pronunciation *ex nihilo* . . . but by virtue of external prestige.

In the writings of the Rosh, born in Ashkenaz about 1250, we find the same as in the case of Rashi's grandsons: the kamets symbol was called a *patah*. But [soon] there begin to appear in Ashkenaz signs of the northern Palestinian system, and towards the end of the 14th century Ashkenazic Hebrew manuscripts are usually pointed according to the Tiberian style. [Nevertheless] Ashkenazic Bible manuscripts of the 13th, 14th, and a few perhaps even from the 15th centuries have also been preserved that . . . can be understood only in the light of the southern Palestinian reading. Some of these manuscripts have a *patah* instead of a *kamets* and a *kamets* instead of a *patah*; similarly a *segol* instead of a *tsere*. . . . A second group of manuscripts have only *patah* and *segol*. . . . Such confusion and such interchange is conceivable only in the case of punctuators whose vocalic value of *patah* and *kamets* on the one hand, and *segol* and *tsere* on the other, differs from the Ashkenazic pronunciation of today.

Since it is a matter of proving that today's reading in Ashkenaz is not the original one, the question of how far back the Ashkenazic pronuncia-

tion was demonstrably the same as it is today has to be raised. The answer is about 1500; that is, since the beginning of the middle Yiddish period the situation has been more or less the same as today. In the last quarter of the 15th century the Ashkenazic value of the kamets is confirmed by both Jewish and non-Jewish testimony. . . . Up to the 13th century there are no indications of "Ashkenazism". . . . The oldest known instance of a *kamets* with the value 'o' is in a Cologne Hebrew document dated 1266.²⁹

If there has to be a moral to this story of phonetic vicissitudes, let it be this: No Jewish community need deem its own tradition for pronouncing Hebrew superior or inferior to any other phonetic tradition. Doubtless those Sephardic authors who expressed misgivings about their neglect to respect *kamets* or *segol* would have been relieved to learn that their "neglect" was justified all along. Nor should the antiquity of such linguistic heterogeneity surprise us when we ponder the *shibboleth*–*sibboleth* dichotomy of Jephtha's day. "The Gileadites held the fords of the Jordan against the Ephraimites. When any fugitive of Ephraim said, "Let me cross" the men of Gilead would ask him, "Are you an Ephraimite?"; if he said "No" they would ask him to say "shibboleth" but he would say "sibboleth" being unable to pronounce it correctly" (Jud 12:5–6).

In his commentary to these verses, R. David Kimhi (Radak, d. 1235) actually compares the phonetic differences between Gileadite and Ephraimite to a situation in Europe of his day: "Just as they would test the Ephraimites with this word *shibboleth*, they would likewise test them with any word that had the letter *shin*; *shibboleth* serving merely as an example.... Perhaps it was the climate that influenced their discrete pronunciations in the same way that the people of *sarfat* [=France] are unable to make the 'sh' sound but rather pronounce it as a soft *tav*."³⁰

NOTES

1. See Meg. 24b; Yer. Ber. 2:3 [4d] (although the word *kegon* does not appear in either source).
2. "The Visions of R. Asher b. R. Meir Lamlein Reutlingen" (Heb.) by Ephraim Kupfer, *Kobez al Yad* vol. viii (xviii) Jerusalem 1975, pp. 387–423.
3. "The Visions of R. Asher b. R. Meir Lamlein Reutlingen" (Heb.) by Ephraim Kupfer, *Kobez al Yad* vol. viii (xviii) Jerusalem 1975, pp. 387–423.

4. Istria belonged to the Venetian Republic from 1267 until the eighteenth century.
5. *Ish haBenayim* (cf. 1Sam 17:23).
6. A variant of Lemlein which is, in turn, a diminutive of the German for "lamb."
7. The full text of Farissol's Magen Abraham remains in MS. However the section containing our citation was published by D. Löwinger in REJ 105 [N.S. 5] 1940 p. 36. For a fuller appreciation of Farissol, see *The World of a Renaissance Jew: The Life and Thought of Abraham ben Mordecai Farissol* by David B. Ruderman, Cincinnati 1981.
8. Cf. Hos 9:7.
9. Heb. *davar req* see Dt 32:47.
10. The original Hebrew reads "*ekh mashiah yabo*." *Ekh*'s basic meaning is "how." In a non interrogatory sense it occurs in stock phrases such as "*ekh habahur*" (in the text of the *kethubah*). It must also be borne in mind that *Ha-Vikuah*'s Hebrew is not exactly standard. The context, however, leaves little doubt as to Münster's (or rather his protagonist's) intent. Lemlein is also mentioned (derisively of course) by Johannes Pfefferkorn (d. c. 1522) in his *Der Juden Spiegel* (see *The Jewish Messiahs* by Harris Lenowitz, Oxford 1998, pp. 99–101).
11. Basle 1529, p. gimmel (3a). The first edition appeared at Basle in 1529 (Kupfur gives the date as 1534, but *Ha-Vikuah*'s preface is dated 'Tishri 290' which equals September–October 1529).
12. The Hebrew word *adon* means master, ruler or lord. With the letter *yod* added as suffix it could mean either "my master" or "my masters" depending on the vocalization of the *nun*. A *hiriq* under the *nun* indicates that the suffix is singular (*adoni*) as in Gen 33:8, 13; Num 11:28. But when the word is not in the singular, the Tiberian masoretes further distinguish "sacred" from "profane" by pointing the former with a *kamets* under the *nun* and the latter with a *patah*. Thus at Gen 15:2,8 where Abraham is addressing Hashem the *nun* is pointed *kamets*; while in Lot's address to the angels at Gen 19:2 it is pointed *patah*. Now unless the reader distinguishes *kamets* from *patah*, the contrast between "sacred and profane"—as intended by the Tiberian vocalizers of the Bible—is lost. Sephardic pronunciation invites the criticism of R. Emden insofar as it ignores that contrast, thereby "making the holy profane." R. Emden's criticism is endorsed by R. Yitzhak Yaakov Weiss (d. 1989) in his *Minhat Yitzhak* 3:9 and discussed most insightfully by Dr. Isaac B. Gottlieb in "The Politics of Pronunciation" *AJS Review* 32:2, pp. 360–62. I herewith thank R. Alex Kaye for bringing this and related sources to my attention.
13. *Siddoor Beth Ya'aqob*; translation based on H. J. Zimmels' in his *Ashkenazim and Sephardim* London 1976, p. 86. For other renderings from Hebrew, this article employs a blend of standard and our own translations.
14. The Talmud (both at Ned. 37b and at Meg. 3a) reflects a Hebrew Vorlage *be-sefer torat ha-elohim* whereas our biblical text reads *be-sefer be-torat ha-elohim*.
15. In late Biblical Hebrew HBN often denotes "causing others to understand."

16. Literally: “an oral law (*or* tradition) to Moses from Sinai.” However, the phrase’s precise connotation is disputed.
17. Since the biblical books are traditionally written without diacritics, the word formed of *aleph- resh- tsadi* allows of various pronunciations. We depend on “tradition” to tell us that the word is ERETS—except in its pausal form which is ARETS (*or* ORETS).
18. *Leshon Limmudim* 1:5, 1st edition, Constantinople 1506.
19. Because of the extreme scarcity of Hebrew texts with pristine Babylonian vocalization (i.e., prior to the infiltration of Tiberian norms), scholars remain divided as to whether the Babylonian diacritic called *kemots puma* resembled the Tiberian *kamets* or the “Sephardic” *patah*. In the Babylonian system itself there was no discrete *patah*; a single diacritic served as counterpart for both Tiberian *patah* as well as *segol* (see “The Kamaz in Babylonian Phonetics and in Yemen” by Hanokh Yalon, *Tarbiz* 33 pp.97–108, English summary p.i; also Israel Yeivin’s *The Hebrew Language Tradition as Reflected in the Babylonian Vocalization* [Heb.] Jerusalem 1985 vol. 1 pp. 56–57).
20. E.g., The patriarch is Abraham not Abrohom; the matriarch Sarah not Soroh, etc.
21. “*le-toldot ha-mivta ha-ivri bime ha-benyim*” in *Mehkarim Ve-iiyunim*, Tel Aviv 1954 pp. 42ff.
22. *The Cairo Genizah*, second edition, New York 1959 pp.184–186.
23. *Mahzor Vitry*, S. Hurwitz edition, Nuremberg 1923 p. 462.
24. *The Hebrew Language Tradition as Reflected in the Babylonian Vocalization* vol. 1 pp. 29–30.
25. *Inyanei Lashon*, Jerusalem 1942.
26. The convention of using aleph to represent an ‘o’ sound belongs exclusively to the orthography of the Yiddish language which began to be written in Hebrew letters not much earlier than the fourteenth century. Rashi’s spelling of *la’az* (=Old French) words knows nothing of such a convention.
27. For a modern edition see *The Beginning of Wisdom* edited by Raphael Levy and Francisco Cantera, Johns Hopkins Studies in Romance Literatures and Languages, Extra Volume XIV, Baltimore 1939.
28. Weinreich’s designation for what is more commonly referred to as the Erets Yisrael system. The Tiberian he sporadically calls the northern Palestinian.
29. *History of the Yiddish Language*, translated by Shlomo Noble with the assistance of Joshua A. Fishman, Chicago 1980 pp. 359–369.
30. The geographical parameters of Radak’s *sarfai* are only loosely identifiable with modern France.

Poetry, Myth, and Kabbala: Jewish and Christian Intellectual Encounters in Late Medieval Italy

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The nature of a diasporic culture—such as the Jewish Italian one—should be understood as an ongoing process of merging and sharing various intellectual materials derived from both the Jewish and the non-Jewish past and present. Throughout the areas where they settled in the Italian peninsula, Jews have both elaborated their own traditional authorities and borrowed non-native elements from the surrounding cultures, influencing the latter in their turn.

In Italy, where Jews had established thriving communities since Roman times, the intellectual cooperation with the non-Jewish society was always especially strong throughout the centuries, in part due to the fact that the Jewish population never became numerically significant, therefore being largely exposed to the cultural influence of the majority.

The small Italian communities kept in constant contact with one

another and with major centers of Jewish knowledge outside of Italy—especially when they had to solve juridical or religious questions, which often derived from the merging of non-indigenous Jewish groups into the local ones. Italian Jews moved around for commercial and educational purposes: often in the double identity of traders and scholars, sometimes as talented physicians or renowned philosophers. By wandering about the whole peninsula—and sometimes reaching to farther destinations—they circulated the products of their variegated formation, becoming cultural mediators among Jews and between Jews and non-Jews. They could influence their interlocutors orally or address them with letters or treatises, written in Hebrew, Latin, or the local vernacular languages.

Such a circulation of knowledge was partly responsible for the intellectual cohesion of the Jewish population in the Italian Diaspora: By making themselves stronger, thanks to the cultures of others, they could awaken a deeper awareness of the risks caused by a too-close contact with the majority. However, being in a position of thoroughly understanding the major intellectual trends of the time, they could show their coreligionists how to adapt them to their canonized heritage without losing their religious identity. Although sometimes provoking disputes, the acceptance of cultural elements derived from “foreign” traditions never triggered in Italy the harsh polemics that characterized the intellectual life of Near-Eastern, Spanish, or German communities. In any case, Jewish scholars could ultimately demonstrate that what they were borrowing had originally been stolen from their own heritage.¹ Such an attempt to trace all traditions back to one cultural identity is very common among minorities. In the case of Jews, since everything could be referred to the Hebrew Scriptures, shared also by the Christians, their interpretation went beyond the communitarian borders and became appealing to their non-Jewish interlocutors. In such a framework, even pagan thought, reread according to the Medieval Islamic philosophers, could be referred to remote Jewish sources. As a matter of fact, what Muslim and Christian theologians had done in the previous centuries in order to allow contemporary scholars to merge religious authorities and rational thinkers into a theological system, had already been experienced by the Jewish scholars working in the Near East in the first centuries of the Common Era, as well as by the Church Fathers. Medieval Jewish mediators were following in the footsteps of their predecessors, who aimed to foster a common intellectual wisdom rooted in a uniquely inspired religious tradition.²

Thus, during the Middle Ages, Jewish communities in Italy, mostly in the South and in Rome, while continuing to view the Land of Israel and Babylon as the main spiritual centers of their religious tradition, developed their own rituals, their own distinctive culture, and their own academies, where they offered new interpretations of biblical and rabbinic literature—and also grounding them in non-Jewish speculation.³ Although they followed trends that were common in the Jewish communities in the East and the Byzantine empire, at least from the ninth century, Jews in Apulia (at the heel of the Italian peninsula), commented upon the Scripture and the Talmud by making use of Hellenistic exegetical methods, which, although rooted in the rabbinic tradition, could leave room to allegorical interpretations based also on Islamic and Byzantine thought.⁴

The age of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194–1250), Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, best known by the title of King of Sicily, should be viewed as the first period when closer intellectual contacts between Jews and Christians were made possible in Italy. This celebrated monarch, who was both admired for his political skill and feared by the Pope for suspicions of heresy, showed a sharp interest in science and philosophy and a multiform cultural curiosity (he could express himself in Latin, Greek, and Arabic, as well as in other vernacular languages spoken in his kingdom). He eagerly invited Jewish scholars to his court, some from distant regions, requesting their services in translating philosophical and scientific manuscripts from Arabic and Hebrew into the Romance languages. Jews were sought both for their competence in biblical interpretation, which obviously represented one of their most important skills, and for their ability to introduce Christians to the most recent achievements of Eastern thought and science, thanks to their knowledge of Arabic. Moreover, since Jews frequently practiced medicine, they were often hired to translate Arabic medical works unknown in Western Europe.

Under the protection of Frederick II Jewish scholars were entitled to share their knowledge with their non-Jewish colleagues.⁵ The best-documented episode of such an intellectual exchange is represented by the encounter of the Provençal scholar Jacob Anatoli (first half of the thirteenth century) with the Christian philosopher Michael Scot (d. 1235).⁶ Anatoli, who had been invited to Naples by the king, and at whose request translated several Averroistic works, related in his collection of sermons entitled *Malmad haTalmidim* (*Goad to Scholars*) that king Frederick possessed a thorough knowledge of *Moreh Nevukhim* (*Guide of the Perplexed*),

the controversial masterwork of the Andalusian Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides (ca. 1138–1204),⁷ whose work and thought were a common subject of debate among the scholars of the court only a few decades after the philosopher's death. Moreover, Anatoli's sermons inform us of the various subjects, ranging from the allegorical interpretation of the Bible to the discussion of complex philosophical issues, pertaining to deep theological problems, which were dealt with in meetings of philosophers of different faiths in Frederick's court. It was not uncommon at that time for a Jewish scholar to support the philosophical interests of a clergyman who was deeply interested in the study of the Scripture—but the opposite case was also frequent. For instance, Moses ben Solomon of Salerno (d. 1279), who had studied in Rome, collaborated with the Dominican Apulian friar Niccolò of Giovinazzo. Moses wrote a commentary on the two first books of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, relying on both the Latin and the Hebrew translations of the text (originally composed in Arabic), and often compared Hebrew technical terms with their Latin equivalents. In his Hebrew-Latin philosophical lexicon, Moses resorted to Niccolò of Giovinazzo, and quoted the latter's explanations on some chapters of the first book of the *Guide* in his own commentary.⁸

The death of Frederick II (1250) and of his son Manfredi (1266), and the events that led Southern Italy to fall into the hands of the Angevins, were probably among the major factors that induced some Jews to leave the Kingdom of Naples, in search of better conditions in the communal freer cities in Northern and Central Italy. Still, the court of Robert of Anjou (d. 1343) in Naples continued to attract Jewish scholars during the first half of the fourteenth century.⁹

Among the most outstanding intellectuals of the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, was Judah ben Moses Romano, a former disciple of Zerahyah Hen from Barcelona. Judah spent many years in Rome, his birthplace, and translated several Hebrew works from Hebrew into Latin for the King of Naples, such as the *Liber de Causis* (*Book on Causes*), which had been attributed to Aristotle, but was effectively a Neoplatonic¹⁰ text, as well as Averroes's *De Substantia Orbis* (*On World's Substance*). At the same time Judah translated into Hebrew Latin works composed by Aegidius Romanus, Albertus Magnus, and Alexander of Hales, in addition to writings by Thomas Aquinas. In so doing, Judah was following the tradition of Jewish scholars of previous generations,

such as Hillel ben Shmuel of Verona (ca. 1220–1295), who, beside translating Thomas Aquinas's *De Unitate Intellectus* (*On the Unity of the Intellect*), had propagated Maimonidean and Scholastic teachings both in Hebrew and in Latin all around Italy, especially in a school he founded in Capua (near Naples), which was attended, among others, by the famous Spanish kabbalist Avraham ben Shmuel Abulafia (1240–ca. 1291). Even in his biblical interpretation, Judah Romano, like his predecessor Hillel, never hesitated to resort to rationalistic thought. Judah, as well as his cousin Immanuel ben Solomon Romano (ca. 1261–ca. 1328), exerted a substantial influence on Italian Jewish philosophers of later centuries.¹¹

Jewish scholars who flourished in late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth-century Rome and Southern Italy took an active part in the contemporary literary trends that were discussed among Italian non-Jewish literati. If Plato and Aristotle, the highest intellectual authorities of the past, denounced the use of poetry as a vehicle for conveying untruthful information to a naïve audience, how could Jewish scholars explain the use of poetry in the Bible, a corpus of writings that had been revealed by God? By founding themselves on the Hebrew Scripture, they could demonstrate that there were different kinds of poetic discourse and that the biblical one was the highest and the truest of all. Following in the steps of the Aristotelian logical tradition, they maintained that, like any other poetic genre, biblical poetry contained metaphors, although these conceived hidden mysteries, whose perfect knowledge would allow scholars to understand the secrets of the Godhead. After all, the ancient prophets were nothing but poets, who had received by God the gift to foresee the events and to express the future in poetic terms.¹²

The revival of poetry as prophecy was very significant in the Middle Ages. The later rediscovery, through Byzantium, of ancient Greek prophetic texts, thought to be more ancient than what they really were, made Western scholars more eager to hold discussions with Jews about biblical poetry and prophecy. Therefore, throughout the Middle Ages, the poetic interpretation of the Bible became common, and Jews helped their Christian colleagues to reveal the mysteries of the Jewish interpretation of biblical poetry in order to better understand its profound meanings. What Christians did not know (nor possibly Jews) was that the poetic texts by which Jews meant to reveal religious mysteries were not very old but were the result of late-antique pagan speculative sources, which sounded famil-

iar to non-Jewish intellectuals. By holding that the Hebrew texts were more ancient than their Greek sources, both Jews and Christians could prove that pagan authors had been influenced by Jewish traditions in the antiquity. Moreover, the Platonic attack against mythology as related to poetry could be explained against the background of the allegorical reading of biblical poetry. In the case of a prophetic poetry, myth was no longer a danger. That is why Byzantine Christian authors on the Eastern side of the Mediterranean and Spanish Jewish kabbalists on its Western side reintroduced a poetic discourse in their religious traditions that could take myth into account.

It was not by mere chance that in the same generation of Dante Alighieri, the author of the prophetic poem known by later generations as *The Divine Comedy*, Jewish Italian scholars turned biblical poetry into a prophetic discourse that reread Jewish themes in a philosophic and sometimes mythical perspective. The first known Jewish poet to be involved in this project was Immanuel ben Solomon of Rome, whom some scholars believe to have been on friendly terms with Dante. Immanuel may be seen as the best representative of late Medieval Jewish Italian culture. Born in Rome in the same generation that witnessed the contemporary presence in the city of Jewish scholars coming from the most important centers of the Diaspora, he belonged to a wealthy family of traders and, being a banker himself, wandered around several cities for his commercial activities. At the same time he was a very skilled philosopher, well versed in the Scholastic interpretation of the Scripture, especially knowledgeable in the Maimonidean tradition. Among his exegetic works, his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is of special renown. In it he draws upon the homonymous work by the Provençal author Moses ibn Tibbon (flourished in the second half of the thirteenth century), in order to demonstrate the higher status of biblical poetry. His poems, written in elegant Tuscan Italian or biblical Hebrew, followed both the contemporary Italian and Spanish traditions. It is assumed that it was in Immanuel's generation, and especially in the Roman intellectual environment, that the newly produced or reorganized kabbalistic material was brought from Spain to Italy. Although it is very hard to demonstrate that Dante's *Comedy* was influenced by Kabbala, it is likely that this author might have come across some Hebrew mystical interpretations that widely circulated around Italy in the early decades of the fourteenth century. For instance, the role of the *Shekhinah*, the female

aspect of God, who could be identified with the Shulamite of the *Song of Songs* according to Jewish Medieval interpreters, corresponds to the angelic lady on which the poetry of Dante and his Tuscan contemporaries mainly focused.¹³ Like the latter, Immanuel praises women as manifestations of the higher divine world.

Let us examine, for instance, Immanuel's sixteenth *Mahberet* (*Composition*), a chapter from his major literary work entitled *Mahbarot* (*Compositions*), which focuses on the nature of the angel-like woman. When Immanuel and his fictitious friend, the "Prince," meet her first, the mysterious lady looks so beautiful that "everyone who sees her, praises her for her beauty, wisdom and skills"; "her eyes throw arrows that are dipped in the blood of those who passionately long for her" and she is "perfectly aware that by her light she rules over any other light." She is very modest, though, because she knows fairly well that "were she prouder, when walking in the city streets the angels would not dare meet her. . . ."¹⁴

All these features attributed by Immanuel to his "Madonna" are clearly reminiscent of the virtues attributed to Beatrix by Dante.¹⁵ Moreover, Immanuel's *Mahbarot*, which stylistically originate from the Arabic *maqama* genre in its mixture of poetry and prose, look similar to Dante's *Vita nova*, a *prosimetrum*, which is a literary work made up of both verse and prose, dealing with the beatific influence of Beatrix's love.

If the topic of Platonic love known in a Islamicate Aristotelian garb was influential in late-thirteenth and fourteenth-century Italy, it became one of the major issues that were discussed between the first half of the fifteenth century and mid-sixteenth century, when Italian intellectual circles were heavily influenced by Byzantine Neoplatonic theologies introduced into the peninsula—especially during and after the 1439 Council of Florence. This was a political and religious endeavor, aiming to reunite the Western and the Eastern Churches, and was made possible due to the diplomatic and financial activities of the powerful Medici family. The trend to read Christianity in the light of pagan myth—thanks to the rediscovery of Greek texts brought to Italy by the Byzantines—opened the path to a thorough search of all the mysteries conceived in different religious thoughts. Among those mysteries, hidden in sacred poetry, Jewish Kabbala could become a major tool for a reappraisal of ancient prophetic sources.

Beside Judah and Immanuel Romano, who also made use of kabbalistic motifs associated with Neoplatonic and Aristotelian concepts, the

Roman scholar Menahem ben Benjamin of Recanati (active in the first half of the fourteenth century) was among the most important and influential Italian Rabbis of his time, whose work became the most commonly studied among the Italian-Jewish students of the esoteric tradition. In his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, composed at the beginning of the fourteenth century, Menahem selected and quoted passages from the most outstanding authorities of Medieval Spanish and Provençal Kabbala, mainly from *Sefer haZohar* (*Book of Splendor*)¹⁶ and *Sefer haBahir* (*Bright Book*), while concomitantly relying on Maimonides' rationalistic thought, which—as stated—was widely known and appreciated by both Christian and Jewish scholars in Italy. Menahem was but the first of a long tradition of Italian scholars who demonstrated the possible connections of Jewish Aristotelian thought with the kabbalistic tradition.¹⁷ Another outstanding kabbalistic figure was Abraham Abulafia (1240–ca. 1291), who, though born in Spain, spent a long time in Rome and Southern Italy, where he decided to merge the most deeply mystical traditions of Judaism with Maimonidean thought, thus creating a trend of Kabbala, which has been called ecstatic or prophetic, that was to develop in Sicily, where Abulafia founded a school in the final years of his life.¹⁸

Unlike philosophical texts, Jewish kabbalistic works were known only within the Jewish communities until the fifteenth century, when this esoteric doctrine became an important object of interest for Christian secular humanists, as well as for Christian clergymen, in the context of the reappraisal of ancient sources coming from the East and allegedly related to prophetic revelations from High.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) was a Christian scholar who spent the last years of his brief life in Florence. Inspired by the Greek revival that had taken place in the environment of the Medici family, he studied Platonic and Neoplatonic sources and elaborated on the ancient view according to which an allegorical reading of pagan myths could explain the most hidden mysteries of Christian theology. However, besides merging Plato, Pythagoras, Hermes Trismegistus, and Orpheus according to the Florentine tradition (which had been fostered by the Latin translations of the Greek texts reintroduced in Italy by the Byzantines), Pico decided to include kabbalistic texts in his all-comprehensive analysis of pagan myth. By the end of 1486 he wrote his Latin oration *De hominis dignitate* (*On Man's Dignity*), in which he affirmed that, in order to ascend to God,

man needs a *medium*, which Pico identified as a cherub: his assumption was based on a kabbalistic rereading of Pseudo-Dyonisian angelology.¹⁹ One of Pico's Jewish assistants, Yohanan ben Yizhaq Alemanno (ca. 1435–ca. 1506), affirmed in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, dedicated to Pico, that angels are the only *medium* that allow man's soul to ascend to God.²⁰ As a matter of fact, a few years before composing his oration, Pico, who was deeply fascinated with Tuscan poetry of the previous centuries, wrote a commentary on one of his friend Girolamo Benivieni's love poems.²¹ The latter had been composed in the Tuscan thirteenth/fourteenth-century style, though they more clearly expressed Platonic and Neoplatonic themes cherished by the scholars of the humanist Florentine environment. Let us take the following of Benivieni's verses into account:²²

From supernal love derives
the fire by whose virtue
all living creatures exist.
When such fire burns in ourselves,
our heart grows, while dying.

Pico wrote that in these words “astonishing and secret mysteries of love”²³ are concealed. The profound sense of Benivieni's verses ought to be sought in the ability of man's soul to turn totally to the object of her desire and die by virtue of such passionate love. Those who completely annihilate themselves into intellectual contemplation at exactly the same time when they miss their rational activities, lose their rationality, by acquiring the intellectual level of angels, and, he continues,

[the mystic] dies in the world of the senses, being restored to a better life in the world of the intelligibles [. . .] this is what the wise kabbalists affirm, when they say that Enoch or Metatron, the angel of the Godhead, or any other man can be turned into angels.²⁴

In the system of thought elaborated by the *princeps concordiae*, that is, the “prince of the agreement” between the various religious and philosophic doctrines, as Pico della Mirandola was named by his contemporaries, we can clearly observe his resorting to the most common motifs of Jewish “rational mysticism”: the man who wishes to attain the union with the Active Intellect will encounter the man Enoch, who was turned into the angel Metatron; he will then annihilate his soul in God, by purifying

it through the consuming fire of divine love, as affirmed by Benivieni by the words “When such fire burns in ourselves, our heart grows, while dying.” Pico commented on the latter words:

That is why, if we assume, following the author’s [Benivieni] words, that divine heavenly love is an intellectual desire [. . .] which cannot be attained by man before the corporeal part of his soul has not been removed, the poet is totally right when he argues that while the human heart, that is man’s soul who dwells in man’s heart, burns in the fire of love, dies by that fire, and its death is not a diminution, but a growth, since when the soul has been completely burnt off by that flaming ardour, as if offered in the holiest holocaust, as if offered in sacrifice to the first Father, the source of all beauty, she is led, by ineffable [divine] grace to the Temple of Solomon, which is adorned with all spiritual good, the true dwelling of God. This priceless gift of love which makes men equal to angels, is an admirable virtue which gives us life, by bringing us to death.²⁵

Pico’s conception of divine love considered as an intellectual love, which can be attained solely by freeing one’s soul from corporeal ties and by leading her through the fire of a consuming sacrifice to the Temple of Solomon, “the true dwelling of God,” is strongly reminiscent of analogous views explained, on biblical and kabbalistic bases, in the already mentioned Alemanno’s *Commentary on Solomon’s Song of Songs*.²⁶

This Platonic-mythical-poetic reading of Kabbala, shared by both Jews and Christians, aroused problems in the small Jewish Italian communities. Judah Messer Leon, a fifteenth-century Ashkenazic scholar well versed in Aristotelian philosophy, sent a letter to the members of the Florentine community in which he warned them against any use of Kabbala according to Platonic speculation. He probably feared the possible misunderstandings of Jewish dogmas, when read according to a mythical interpretation. Among Italian Jewish intellectuals, the dogmatic reading of Judaism suggested by Spanish authorities such as Maimonides or the early fifteenth-century Joseph Albo was held in high esteem. This approach to faith allowed Italian Jews to read their faith in parallel terms as Christianity, as a religious system based on dogmas that could be interpreted rationally.

A trace of the polemics against the Florentine community aroused by Messer Leon can be seen in Elijah Hayyim of Genazzano’s treatise *Iggeret hamudot* (*Epistle of Delight*), a work on philosophy and Kabbala written in

the last decade of the fifteenth century in the form of both a letter and a formal speculative treatise.

Elijah Hayyim of Genazzano (ca. 1440–ca. 1510) was a member of the Jewish banking elite that from the end of the fourteenth century had been allowed to settle in Tuscan cities. Like the other Jewish banking families, the Genazzanos had originally come from Rome and they boasted of their descent from the priestly families, who had been deported by Titus to Italy after the destruction of the Second Temple. Roman Jews stressed their distinctive character that made them unique in the Diaspora, thus highlighting the differences from Ashkenazic or Sephardic communities.

Elijah Hayyim wrote his *Iggeret hamudot* exactly in the period when refugees from the Iberian peninsula were arriving in large numbers to Italy. For many Italian (i.e., Roman) Jews, the presence of the Sephardim was a threat to the good but instable social conditions they had managed to create in the two previous centuries. This is the reason why in his *Epistle* Genazzano attacks contemporary Sephardic intellectuals, accusing them for their radical ideas whose only aim, according to him, was that of destroying the true Jewish tradition. With this goal in mind, Genazzano responded some intellectual questions addressed to him by his former yeshiva-fellow David, the son of Benjamin ben Joav of Montalcino. Benjamin of Montalcino, the head of a renowned Tuscan yeshiva, had been the target of Judah Messer Leon's criticisms some forty years earlier.²⁷

Genazzano is also known for a poetic debate on woman's nature, composed in Dante's and Immanuel's garb.²⁸ He was very sensitive to the Neoplatonic atmosphere of Florence and in several passages of his treatise he reveals a thorough knowledge of some of the major trends of the Platonic interpretations of Kabbala, which were common among his Jewish contemporaries and which had been borrowed by Pico della Mirandola.

When dealing with a passage from the *Sefer haIqqarim* (*The Book of Principles*), a philosophical and apologetic treatise written by the Spanish Joseph Albo, a work that—as previously stated—had become very influential on fifteenth-century Italian Jewish speculation, Genazzano refutes the dogmatic interpretation of the Jewish faith presented by Albo.

Genazzano objects to the rational dogmatic understanding of Judaism, stressing that such a presentation of his faith has nothing to do with the traditional rabbinic and kabbalistic tradition, the only true tradi-

tion that allows Jews to deeply understand Judaism. In other words, Genazzano holds that the traditional kabbalistic reading of rabbinic and liturgical aspects of Judaism is the only way to adhere to the values of his faith, rooted in the Scripture and not in its rational interpretation. What is significant for our analysis is the relief the author gives to contemporary non-Jewish trends of thought in order to support his views rooted in Jewish tradition.

For instance, Genazzano follows the traditional kabbalistic interpretation of the levirate rules which could be read in the *Book of the Zohar* or in Recanati's *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, which was much more popular than the *Zohar* in fifteenth-century Italy. Genazzano praises the rabbinical-kabbalistic tradition for being of higher value than the rational understanding of Judaism, fostered by Maimonides, Albo and other Spanish authors. He then continues:

As a matter of fact, behold, I have found the following statement in an ancient book attributed to a wise man called Zoroaster: "The doctrine of the transmigration of the soul was received by the Indians from the Persians, and by the Persians from the Egyptians; by the Egyptians from the Chaldeans, and by the Chaldeans from Abraham. The Chaldeans expelled him from their land, since they hated him because he held that the soul is the source of movement and that she is the cause of the change in matter and that there are many souls and so on."²⁹

In order to support rabbinic authority, Genazzano quotes the Persian Zoroaster, a major authority for the Florentine humanists who read Latin translations of the Greek treatises attributed to this semi-mythical ancient sage in order to find evidence for Christian traditions. The conception of the transmission of divine knowledge through a chain of initiates that had been common among late antique Neoplatonists and had been revived in the fifteenth century by Florentine intellectuals was influential on a Jewish Florentine scholar.³⁰ Now, in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Platonic Conclusions according to the Arab Adelandus*, written a few years before Genazzano's text, we read that: "All the Indian, Persian, Egyptian and Chaldean sages believed in the doctrine of the transmigration of the souls":³¹ Pico's words parallel exactly Genazzano's statement, though the reference to Abraham should be sought in the views of the Byzantine scholar Georgios Gemistus Pletho, a philosopher who had taken part in the 1439 Council of Florence. In his *Treatise on the laws* Gemistus Pletho

maintained in fact that Abraham believed in metempsychosis and attributed this view to Indians, Persians and Egyptians.³²

Genazzano, who thus demonstrates that he is fully aware of contemporary non-Jewish speculation, resorts to the achievements of Florentine humanists both to demonstrate the higher antiquity of Jewish revelation and to argue against rational dogmatic views held by his coreligionists.

The impact of the local cultures, as well as the changes in the process of transmission of different materials within Jewish Italian communities, shaped the nature of the reception and of the subsequent interpretations of traditional lore, at least until the very end of the fifteenth century. As the revolutionary trends in Renaissance science and thought started to keep separated faith from reason, the modes of intellectual relations between Jews and non-Jews changed accordingly, as well as the official acknowledgement of the role of the Jews in Christian societies.³³

NOTES

1. See N. Roth, "The 'Theft of Philosophy' by the Greeks from the Jews," *Classical Folia* 22 (1978), pp. 53–67.
2. See F. Lelli, "Prisca Philosophia and Docta Religio: The Boundaries of Rational Knowledge in Jewish and Christian Humanist Thought," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 91 (2000), pp. 53–100.
3. On the history of Italian Judaism see *The Jews of Italy: Memory and Identity*, ed. by B.D. Cooperman and B. Garvin, Maryland 2001.
4. See R. Bonfil, *History and Folklore in a Medieval Jewish Chronicle*, Leiden 2009.
5. See G. Sermoneta, "Federico II e il pensiero ebraico nell'Italia del suo tempo," in *Federico II e l'arte del Duecento italiano*, Galatina 1980, pp. 183–197.
6. See C. Sirat, "Les traducteurs juifs à la cour des rois de Sicile et de Naples," in *Traductions et traducteurs au Moyen Âge*, Paris 1989, pp. 169–191.
7. See M. Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides. Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics and Moral Philosophy*, Chicago 1990.
8. See G. Sermoneta, *Un glossario filosofico ebraico-italiano del XIII secolo*, Rome 1969.
9. Neapolitan and Sicilian Jewish scholars continued to play a very important role in the diffusion of Jewish and Arabic texts into Christian culture still during the fifteenth century.
10. Neoplatonism was a late Greek-Hellenistic philosophical school, dating from around 200–300 C.E. Its quintessential figure was Plotinus. Neoplatonists considered themselves Platonists, and their influence was considerable dur-

- ing the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.
11. See G. Sermoneta, "L'incontro culturale tra ebrei e cristiani nel Medioevo e nel Rinascimento," in *Ebrei e Cristiani nell'Italia medievale e moderna: converzioni, scambi, contrasti*. Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference of the Italian Association for the Study of Judaism (AISG), ed. by M. Luzzati, M. Olivari, and A. Veronese, Rome 1988, pp. 183–207.
12. See F. Lelli, "Poetic Theology and Jewish Kabbala in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Speculation: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Elijah Hayyim ben Benjamin of Genazzano," *Studia Judaica* 16 (2008), pp. 144–152.
13. See F. Lelli, "Spuren jüdischer mystischer Motive in italienischer Dichtung des späten Mittelalters und der frühen Renaissance," *Im Gespräch*, 7 (2003), pp. 33–51.
14. See *Mahbarot Immanuel haRomi*, ed. by D. Yarden, Jerusalem 1957, II, p. 275 (Hebrew).
15. See, e.g., Dante's poem *Ladies who have intelligence of love*, in the nineteenth chapter of the *Vita Nova* (see https://halogen.georgetown.edu/mydante_test/vita/page/7/).
16. Due to the paucity of copies of Zoharic manuscripts circulating in Italy, Recanati's commentary soon became the only source for Italian Jews from which to draw passages from the *Zohar*.
17. See M. Idel, *Rabbi. Menahem Recanati, The Kabbalist*, I vol., Jerusalem 1998 (Hebrew).
18. See M. Idel, *The Mystic Experience of R. Abraham Abulafia*, Albany 1987; Id., *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia's Mystical Thought*, New York 1989.
19. See F. Lelli, "Yohanan Alemanno, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola e la cultura ebraica italiana del XV secolo," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*. Convegno internazionale di studi nel cinquecentesimo anniversario della morte (1494–1994), ed. by G.C. Garfagnini, Florence 1997, pp. 317–320; Id., "Alemanno, Yohanan ben Isaac," in *Encyclopedia of the Renaissance*, ed. by P.F. Grendler, New York 1999, I, pp. 40–42.
20. Alemanno's *Commentary* is entitled *Hesheq Shelomoh (Solomon's Desire)*. The title hints at the passionate love of king Solomon for intellectual wisdom, which is the prerequisite, according to Alemanno, for the king's attainment of both rational and suprarational knowledge of God, which was to result in the mystical union of Solomon's soul with God.
21. On Italian love poems written by Pico della Mirandola, see G. Pico della Mirandola, *Sonetti*, ed. by G. Dilemmi, Torino 1994; M. Martelli, "La poesia giovanile e le opere in volgare di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," in *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*. Convegno internazionale di studi nel cinquecentesimo anniversario della morte (1494–1994), ed. by G.C. Garfagnini, Florence 1997, pp. 531–541.
22. G. Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno e Scritti vari*, ed. by E. Garin, Florence 1942, p. 455, stanza IV, vv. 9–11.
23. Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate*, p. 553. On p. 558 the same vers-

es are interpreted according to the kabbalistic motif of the mystic union caused by God's kiss: on this issue see F Lelli, "Un collaboratore ebreo di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: Yohanan Alemanno," *Vivens Homo*, 5,2 (1994), pp. 401–430.

24. Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate*, p. 554.
25. For a full bibliography of English versions of Pico's works see <http://www.mvdougherty.com/pico.htm>
26. See Lelli, "Yohanan Alemanno, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola," pp. 319–320. On Alemanno's *Commentary*, see A. M. Lesley, *The 'Song of Solomon's Ascents' by Yohanan Alemanno. Love and Human Perfection according to a Jewish Associate of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Univ. of Berkeley, Calif., 1976.
27. See F Lelli, "Poetic Theology and Jewish Kabbalah in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Speculation: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Elijah Hayyim ben Benjamin of Genazzano."
28. See A. Neubauer, "Zum Frauenliteratur," *Israelitische Letterbode* 10 (1892), pp. 97–105.
29. Eliyyah Hayyim ben Binyamin da Genazzano, *La lettera preziosa (Iggeret hamudot)*, ed. by F Lelli, Florence-Nîmes 2002, p. 152. An English version of Genazzano's treatise is forthcoming.
30. See F Lelli, "*Prisca Philosophia* and *Docta Religio*. The Boundaries of Rational Knowledge in Jewish and Christian Humanist Thought."
31. See S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems*, Tempe, AZ, 1998.
32. See M. Idel, "Differing Conceptions of Kabbalah in the Early 17th Century," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. by I. Twersky and B. Septimus, Cambridge, Mass., 1986, pp. 137–200: par. D.
33. See R. Bonfil, *Cultural Change among the Jews of Early Modern Italy*, Farnham, Surrey 2010.

Or haHayyim: Creativity, Tradition, and Mysticism in the Torah Commentary of R. Hayyim ibn Attar

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God's Torah lay written before me; it awakened me and gave me expression. It illuminated my soul in the sweetest of lights, and my soul felt as if she had seen its secrets. She will eat and become sated of its savory delights, though many remain yet untasted; in the light of the countenance of the living King.

—R. Hayyim ibn Attar, *Hakdamat haRav haMehaber*

A few years ago a friend of mine spent the weekend in a Hassidic enclave in upstate New York. When he entered the Bet Midrash early Shabbat morning, he noticed a young Hassid poring over the *Or haHayyim* commentary on the Torah with obvious fervor and reverence. My friend walked over and asked why he had chosen to learn a Sephardic Torah commentary at this time, since many Hassidim have the custom of studying Hassidic books of mystical thought before the morning prayers. With surprise and horror, the lad looked up and immediately replied: *Neyn! Vos zogstu?! Dos iz a khassidishe seyfer!* [No! What do you mean?! This is a Hassidic book!]

This story is indicative of the great affection felt for R. Hayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar (1696–1743) even outside of the immediate Sephardic world.² This scion of the Moroccan Jewish community penned important works in both halakha and aggada, but the commentary on the Torah entitled *Or haHayyim* is undoubtedly his most influential book.³ It was originally published in 1742, alongside the traditional triad of biblical text, Rashi, and Onkelos' translation, and within a few decades had captured a relatively large readership among European Jewish communities. *Or haHayyim* rose from popular to canonical status when it became the most recent commentary to be included in many standard printings of the *Mikra'ot Gedolot*, some of which have since replaced the works of classical Rishonim with additional super-commentaries to *Or haHayyim* itself.

R. Hayyim's commentary is a demanding but extremely rewarding study. His explanations are conceptually complicated, stylistically perplexing, and often more verbose than any of the other commentaries on the page. Yet there is a depth and profundity in his words that emerges from amidst their difficulty. As I hope to demonstrate, at the core of R. Hayyim's commentary stands a beautiful double helix of two seamlessly integrated approaches to interpreting the Torah: the search for the verses' plain sense on one hand, and the quest for their deeper mystical significance on the other. R. Hayyim has outspoken affection for *peshat* and often explains verses according to their plain-sense, contextual, and literal meanings. His commentary is also a tremendous repository of creative mystical thought, informed by the kabbalistic tradition but not bound to the teachings of any particular school. For some exegetes these goals have proven mutually exclusive; R. Hayyim, however, maintained that both a verse's *peshat* and its mystical significance are equally important and true. The primary goal of this study is to bring into sharper focus several of the most important mystical themes of his commentary and to offer a few remarks on their potential relevance to contemporary Jewish conversations.⁴

R. Hayyim ibn Attar was born in 1696 in Salé, Morocco, into an illustrious family descended from Spanish exiles.⁵ The young R. Hayyim was educated in the traditional manner by his grandfather, but his early years were peripatetic and he was often forced to move from city to city on family business or to escape persecution. After marrying into a wealthy family that was distantly related, R. Hayyim devoted himself entirely to his studies for a number of years. Yet difficult times returned with the death of his father-in-law in the early 1720s. Without patronage, the combined

hardships of economic crises, plagues, and famines forced R. Hayyim into a series of relocations that eventually led him to Jerusalem.

R. Hayyim moved first to Fes, followed by a brief stay in Algiers, and he then settled in Leghorn, where he once again found monetary support and made his home for several years. There R. Hayyim began to teach Torah publicly and served as a communal leader, but by 1740 he and a small number of his close friends and students had resolved to immigrate to Israel in order to establish a new yeshiva. They disembarked in Acre in 1741, where they spent a full year before the epidemics in central Erets Yisrael abated. After moving to Jerusalem the group founded the yeshiva *Kenesset Yisrael*, whose students included the renowned polymath R. Hayyim Yosef David Azulai (the *Hida*, 1724–1806). R. Hayyim ibn Attar died in 1743, and was subsequently interred on the Mount of Olives. The synagogue named for him in the Old City of Jerusalem is still an active place of worship, and to this day R. Hayyim's literary legacy remains quite influential in many religious circles.

Creativity, Tradition, and the Nature of Torah

Before embarking on our exploration of the mystical aspects of *Or haHayyim*, I would like to briefly examine two related issues that will help us clarify a more fundamental question: how R. Hayyim understood the role and limits of biblical interpretation. First, I will examine his attitude toward the classical commentators, and will demonstrate the extent to which he felt himself at creative liberty to offer interpretations, both mystical and plain-sense, that contrast those adduced by earlier sages. Second, I will illustrate R. Hayyim's conception of the nature of the Torah, thus revealing the underlying principles upon which his interpretive approach is based. R. Hayyim's conceptions of biblical interpretation were first analyzed in an enlightening book in Hebrew by the late Professor Elazar Touitou. Since, to my knowledge, this work has never been made available in English, nor have R. Hayyim's attitudes and conceptions been subsequently challenged or developed, it will surely be of worth to present and expand upon them here.

R. Hayyim was a latecomer to the stage of Jewish biblical interpretation. By the early eighteenth century, the "golden age" of exegesis by Western European Rishonim had long since ended. R. Hayyim is counted among the Sephardic Aharonim, whose literary works represent a vastly

different stage of Jewish history. They wrote in a time after the major centers of learning in Spain had been destroyed and their leaders exiled to Christian Europe, North Africa, and *Erets Yisrael*, forever transforming the intellectual centers of gravity of the Jewish world. Kabbala, specifically the Zohar and later the works of R. Isaac Luria (d. 1572), had overtaken philosophy as the only other primary focus of Jewish study in the Sephardic Diaspora other than the Talmud itself, thus ending a centuries-long debate over the merits and demerits of rationalism and mysticism. The second half of the seventeenth century witnessed the dramatic rise and fall of the false messiah Shabbatai Tzevi, whose conversion to Islam left much world Jewry in shambles. Aharonim are generally thought of as far less daring than their early medieval counterparts, and this deferential shift in attitude is often attributed to the political and geographic turbulence. However, as we shall see, R. Hayyim's commentary is bold and innovative in a manner largely uncharacteristic of this period. He was unafraid of disputing the interpretations of authorities that predated him, even those articulated by the revered talmudic sages themselves.

R. Hayyim notes that Hazal frequently offer homiletical (*derash*) interpretations of verses, which often come at the expense of the plain-sense meaning of the text. In some instances he agrees with their *derashot* and comments upon the verse in accord with their reading.⁶ However, in many cases R. Hayyim insists that the verse must be understood according to its *peshat* despite the Sages' homiletical interpretation; though he does not deny the legitimacy of their *derashot*, he presents an alternative reading that conforms to the plain-sense of the passage.⁷ R. Hayyim was fiercely committed to rabbinic legal norms, and in one case writes that he is unwilling to offer an otherwise valid interpretation that conflicted with *halakha*.⁸ Yet he reminds his reader that even Hazal agreed that the Torah would be interpreted in many different ways in the future,⁹ and as long as the law remains unchanged, students of biblical exegesis have nearly unlimited freedom.¹⁰

R. Hayyim's stance toward the classical medieval commentators is similarly complex. Despite having been deeply influenced by Rashi's commentary, R. Hayyim gently disagrees with him on linguistic grounds, for misunderstanding statements of Hazal, and for giving original interpretations not in line with the *peshat*.¹¹ In some cases R. Hayyim agrees with Abraham Ibn Ezra, while elsewhere challenging his reading of a verse; at times R. Hayyim rejected Ibn Ezra's opinion altogether.¹² The

same is true of his attitude toward Ramban, even though the latter's commentary includes a combination of *peshat* and Kabbala not dissimilar to R. Hayyim's own style.¹³ However, perhaps most striking of all is the relative infrequency of his engagement with the works of the Rishonim. Hoping to avoid plagiarism of any kind, he claims to have closed their books before sitting down to write his independent commentary, selectively citing earlier authorities from memory.¹⁴ Only later did he compare his text to theirs, occasionally using their words to support his interpretation or contrasting earlier traditions with his own understanding of the verse.¹⁵

We might thus characterize R. Hayyim ibn Attar's attitude toward earlier interpreters as one of intermittent contradiction, or to be more precise, respectful contradistinction. Although he repudiates their remarks when he deems them insufficient or not in keeping with the plain-sense of the verse, he does not deny the validity of their interpretations, nor does he attack them with any of the invectives wielded by the Rishonim against one another. R. Hayyim's commentary itself offers a prepossessing blend of different homiletic styles, and it is immediately clear that he believes in no single correct explanation of a verse to which all readers must be obeisant. He often offers multiple interpretations of a single passage, occasionally deriving several dozen possible and *correct* meanings. This alone sets him apart from many of the earlier medieval commentators, with Ramban's commentary the possible exception.

R. Hayyim asserts that the Torah has myriad layers of meaning, and careful study of its polysemous words can yield any number of valid interpretations.¹⁶ R. Hayyim invokes the adage commonly found in mystical literature and explains that each of the four primary modes of interpreting the Torah (*peshat*, *remez*, *derash*, *sod*) corresponds to one of the kabbalistic worlds (*asiya*, *beriya*, *yetsira*, *atsilut*).¹⁷ Elsewhere he writes that the Torah itself has an outer, plain-sense meaning, which surrounds and embodies its deeper mystical dimension (*penimiyut*).¹⁸ This description does not simply proscribe how a reader should interpret the biblical text, but describes the very nature of the Torah itself. Furthermore, many intricacies of halakha were passed down as oral traditions, connected to the biblical text but found nowhere explicitly in its words, and the same is true of its kabbalistic significance. The Torah alludes to deeper mysteries that cannot be captured in writing and must be transmitted from student

to teacher. Some of these are outside of the boundaries of language and are comprehensible through experience alone.¹⁹ In sum, while other exegetes have assumed that *peshat* and *penimiyut* are mutually exclusive ends of a spectrum, R. Hayyim's belief that the Torah is multi-faceted and thus able to yield many coterminous explanations is the bedrock of his mystical approach to interpreting the biblical text.²⁰

Mysticism and Kabbala

R. Hayyim's North African community retained much of the *peshat* sensibility beloved by the Andalusian Rishonim.²¹ By the early eighteenth century this intellectual milieu was steeped in Kabbala as well, and by R. Hayyim's time mystical approaches to interpreting the Torah coexisted alongside the quest for its plain-sense meaning. It is thus unsurprising that in addition to establishing *peshat*, *Or haHayyim's* other raison d'être is to explain the mystical significance of the Torah's words. As noted above, R. Hayyim does not see his mystical interpretations as necessarily contradicting the biblical text's plain-sense meaning, but rather amplifying and often complementing it.²² He often refers to this dimension of his exegesis as *remez* (allusion) or *sod* (secret), but from his commentary it is immediately apparent that R. Hayyim did not feel constrained to the symbols of one theosophical system alone. Instead, he synthesized different threads of earlier kabbalistic traditions and wove them together into a tapestry of mystical interpretation not beholden to any single tradition; this is a departure from the rather structured Kabbala included in the commentaries of Ibn Ezra, Ramban, and Menahem Recanati (d. 1310). Indeed, though mystical ideas permeate nearly every page of his commentary, much of its depth is accessible to those with even an elementary background in Kabbala.

R. Hayyim seems to have drawn the majority of his kabbalistic inspiration from the Zohar, which he assumes dates back to the early centuries CE. Sometimes he cites its passages as teachings of Hazal, others as words of the holy Tanna, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai,²³ and quotes the Zohar by name in several dozens of passages.²⁴ By contrast, R. Hayyim refers directly to the teachings of R. Isaac Luria a handful of times,²⁵ and only occasionally cites an oral or written tradition received in the great kabbalist's name.²⁶ Although R. Hayyim refers to Lurianic ideas more subtly in other

places, he never employs such specific keywords as *tsimtsum* or *partsufim*, and it is reasonably clear that his kabbalistic framework was primarily non-Lurianic. This is rather surprising given that Luria's was the dominant mystical voice in seventeenth and eighteenth century Jewish mystical discourse. Perhaps this trepidation reflects fears of association with the Sabbatian heresy based on a dangerous yet creative rereading of Lurianic Kabbala. In a few allusive comments R. Hayyim expressed apprehension about revealing too much; he steadied his pen and refrained from writing down secrets that he felt could not be revealed to a popular audience.²⁷ However, it is also possible R. Hayyim had limited primary-source exposure to the more theoretical complexities of Lurianic Kabbala while writing the majority of his commentary.

Although the precise origins of his mystical thought require further clarification, it is indisputable that R. Hayyim's cosmology was deeply influenced by medieval Kabbala. In his description the spiritual plane and the physical world are not entirely distinct realms, and while there is a perceptible boundary between the human and divine spheres, a bifurcated division between "spiritual" and "corporeal" is anathema to his worldview. R. Hayyim understood the physical world as an intertwined composite of material and spiritual. All corporeal phenomena are animated by a core of divine energy; each aspect of existence is infused with an essential element of divinity, from the highest spiritual worlds to objects that which we perceive as fundamentally inanimate.²⁸ Humanity's sins only have the capacity to lessen the flow of this divine energy, but they can never truly obstruct it. Without exception, all reality is sustained by God's effluence.²⁹

This theme of divine immanence is developed throughout *Or haHayyim*, but R. Hayyim treats it most fully in his comments on the creation narrative. To explain the seeming banality of the verse, "The heavens and the earth were completed in all their array" (Gen. 2:1), he writes:

We were at a loss as to what this verse is supposed to teach us, but its intention seems in accord with what the Sages taught, "God is the place of the world" (*Bereshith Rabbah*, 68:9). We find mentioned [in Scripture] that He also permeates the world, as it says, "the world is full of His glory" (Is. 6:3). Hence, the light of the blessed One both surrounds the world and is its inner essence.

We must understand, why did God do things in this way? I received

an oral tradition from the elder scholars of Torah that God created the world as a sphere so that it could continue to exist, since His powers are equally distributed. This should be explained as follows: Know that no yearning could be sweeter, dearer, more precious, beloved or desired amongst the created beings, especially their inner spiritual elements that recognize and know the light of God, than cleaving to the blessed One's illumination. The vital core [of all creation] pines for Him, striving to apprehend the radiance of His light in some small way, craning to catch a glimpse of God's pleasantness.

Know also that God imbued an element of illuminated wisdom and discernment in every aspect of creation, each according to its nature. Creatures that can speak and animals that cannot, as well as plants and minerals, all have the capacity to know their Maker in their own way . . .

. . . His sweet and yearned for light surrounds the spheres of the world uniformly, and each and every spot in the world's rotation ignites the burning desire to draw close to the Tree of Longing equally . . .

. . . For this reason the world exists within the light of the Creator; His light fills the physical and surrounds it as well. The world continues to endure because of its great longing for God. [The word for "completion" used in] "The heavens and the earth were *completed* (*vaYekhulu*) in all their array" should be understood along the lines of "my soul longs and *desires*" (*kaleta*, Ps. 84:3). This is what truly completed and sustains creation.³⁰

For R. Hayyim, this verse alludes to several important spiritual truths. First, God's simultaneous immanence and transcendence may seem paradoxical, but it is precisely this tension that grants the physical world its perpetuation. The generative longing of creation for a transcendent God is made possible by their innate divine quality, the indwelling of a divine spark that sustains the world. Second, R. Hayyim believes in the capacity of all finite created beings to know God, albeit to varying degrees. The divine remains beyond the absolute grasp of any of His creations, but the inner spiritual quality hidden within the physical means that everything has an unseverable capacity for connecting to the divine.

R. Hayyim demonstrates remarkable creativity and sensitivity in his ability to find mystical significance in the biblical text. In many cases these deeper messages actually represent his understanding of the plain-sense meaning of a verse, and do not come at the exclusion of the *peshat* he so values. For example, R. Hayyim connects the notion of a world infused with divine energy with the initial Shabbat of the creation story:

God created the soul (*nefesh*) of the world on the Sabbath day. This is the deeper meaning of the verse: “And on the seventh day He rested (*shavat*) and infused (*vaYinafash*)” (Ex. 31:17). From this the Sages’ taught that the additional soul mourns when the Sabbath departs (b. Beitsa 16a), but theirs is only a homiletical interpretation . . . the plain-sense of the verse is that . . . “and infused” refers to God’s vital effluence pouring into all created beings, since before Shabbat everything lacked a soul.³¹

R. Hayyim does not read *vaYinafash* as a reflexive description of God desisting from formative work, as it is often understood. Instead, he believes that its plain-sense meaning is an active verb demonstrating that God instilled a necessary current of metaphysical energy into the world through the creation of Shabbat.

R. Hayyim adds that the deep yearning and love felt for God by His creations is entirely mutual. Identifying an interesting parallel between the words *vaYekhulu* in Gen. 2:1 and *vaYekhal* (“and God finished”) in the following verse, he comments:

Just above I translated the word *vaYekhulu* as referring to longing and desire, and we should translate the present [phrase] *vaYekhal Elokim* along the same lines, in accord with the verse, “You will long for the works of Your hands” (Job 14:15). . . . The Lord yearned for and desired His world, and thus through the Seventh Day the world is sustained. . . .³²

The love between God and the physical world is thus reciprocal, cementing the bond between the created world and the divine. However, R. Hayyim often focuses on an expression of God’s love that is more particularistic: His exceptional affection for the Jewish people. It was this love for Israel and His burning desire to wed them to the Torah that led to their redemption from Egypt. The delay of three months before reaching Mt. Sinai gave the Jews time to prepare themselves, as a bridegroom must during the period of his engagement. From God’s perspective, the ideal would have been to deliver them to the wedding canopy immediately.³³

Another prominent mystical theme found in *Or haHayyim* is the mandate to redeem the “sparks of holiness” trapped within the physical world. This idea is closely related to God’s sustaining of physical existence by the reinfusion the world with divine energy. However, the relationship between the sparks and corporeal realm differs in one important respect: the sparks also reflect the inherent brokenness of the world and its partial

disunity from God. This condition began with the edenic sin and has only been exacerbated by mankind's subsequent iniquity. The "husks" of physical reality that surround the sparks are described in distinctly negative terms:

Because of our abundant sins, many sparks of holiness are now bound within the husks, and . . . evil and good are all mixed together. For this reason one must separate the good from the bad, and the light from the darkness in which it has become entangled. However, it is known that the husks derive their vitality from holiness itself, and without this they would have no life force. Therefore, when God separates the light, which is the holiness, the discarded evil is left without any place from which receive sustenance and will be nullified all on its own . . . this is similar to chopping down a tree and removing it from the very roots which give it life; it will become dried out and wither.³⁴

Only a few decades later Hassidism would employ the vocabulary of the sparks to articulate an optimistic view of engaging with physical world, and as we have seen, in many cases R. Hayyim displays a similarly positive outlook. However, in others R. Hayyim tends more toward the dualism commonly found in the medieval kabbalistic tradition, which opposes coarse physicality with sublime spirit. Even the most impure corporeal matter is sustained by the holy sparks, but it cannot endure once we achieve the goal of returning them to their Source.³⁵

The sparks of holiness were originally scattered because of mankind's sin, and R. Hayyim maintains that it is the task of the Jewish people to gather the sparks and remove them from the husks that surround them. He writes:

Primordial Adam was the tree upon which all holy souls were affixed, including all that had entered the world from its inception and all that ever will. When Adam sinned, [the side of] evil became much stronger and took countless [souls] captive. Since becoming a nation God's [chosen] people have constantly striven to separate and remove them from whence they were swallowed up. They do this by means of the font of holiness that God planted in our midst: the Torah and mitzvot.³⁶

Mankind's sin plunged the physical world into a state of fracture. The holy aspects within it, referred to alternatively as sparks, souls, and even aspects of God Himself, are now concealed behind veils of impurity.³⁷ However, the

picture is not so bleak and all is not lost. Israel is charged with redeeming the trapped sparks and “returning them to a state of complete unity” through immersion in Torah study and performing their religious obligations with fervor and intensity.³⁸ This capacity is what defines Jewish people as a “nation of priests.”³⁹ Even their most mundane actions are also reframed as spiritual activities; that we could have been created without the need for physical sustenance proves that eating and drinking must serve the higher purpose of uplifting the sparks trapped within the food.⁴⁰ It was in order to fulfill this very responsibility that the Jewish people were dispersed across the world. Israel was thrust into exile in part because of their sins, but more importantly, they were they enjoined with task of uplifting the scattered sparks and freeing them from their corporeal prisons.⁴¹

R. Hayyim devotes very little space to the complicated and often obscure symbolism that characterized earlier Jewish mystical thought. He rarely refers to the *sefirot* by name, and I was able to find only one instance in which the term “*sefira*” itself appears in *Or haHayyim*.⁴² However, leaving the technical vocabulary of Lurianic Kabbala and the Zohar does not mean that R. Hayyim shies away from a mystical conception of God. He discusses the divine indwelling in the physical world (Shekhinah) at great length. For R. Hayyim, the Shekhinah is not the hypostatic entity conceived of in medieval Kabbala, nor is it simply an abstract attribute of the Godhead. Instead, he describes the Shekhinah as a finite (if incorporeal) instantiation of God, fully united with Him but within the ken of physical beings and their limited faculties.⁴³ Israel met the Shekhinah on Mt. Sinai,⁴⁴ and it is with this the aspect of God that the angels can interact.⁴⁵ He notes that there are an infinite number of gradations of the indwelling of the Shekhinah. One particularly intense manifestation the can only be revealed to the fullest assembly of 600,000 people,⁴⁶ but to a lesser degree God’s immanent presence may be found in the synagogue, the study hall, and with all who learn Torah together.⁴⁷ Indeed, each Jewish individual can be transformed into a dwelling for the Shekhinah through performing the mitzvot and cultivating a sense of awe of the divine.⁴⁸

It should come as no surprise, then, that R. Hayyim sees humankind as the pinnacle and purpose of creation.⁴⁹ The unique qualities of the human soul connect them to the divine in a manner that far exceeds the fundamental ability of all creations to recognize God mentioned above. Before entering the world, the human soul is a part of God that is incor-

porated into the supernal and sublime divine Light.⁵⁰ The soul maintains its permanent connection with the divine even after being fused with a physical body; this bond allows the soul its lasting vitality even after the body has died.⁵¹ The human soul also serves as a channel for divine energy into the physical realm. R. Hayyim describes it as the nexus that links upper spiritual worlds to the four elements, thus allowing corporeal matter to be infused with God's effluence.⁵² The human soul is the ladder of Jacob's dream, bridging between heaven and earth and uniting the two realms. The angels "ascending and descending upon it" are the *mitzvot*; they are actions with the capacity to uplift the "supernal lights" (an allusion to kabbalistic theurgy) and bring down a "cascade of brilliant illumination" into the physical.⁵³ Indeed, in observing the commandments the righteous throw open the heavenly conduits through which divine energy enters the world.⁵⁴

R. Hayyim's understanding of the nature of the soul is not democratic, and he clearly believes that non-Jews have a different metaphysical structure.⁵⁵ Spiritual facility remains a spectrum even amongst the Jewish people. The soul is an innately holy spark that is given as a divine gift, but it must be continuously refined and polished in order to increase its capacity for illumination.⁵⁶ A soul is able to apprehend holiness and becomes a prism for refracting divine effluence into the world only to the degree that it has been consciously prepared for this task.⁵⁷ Prophecy is similarly a function of spiritual refinement.⁵⁸ The *mitzvot* are beacons along this journey, since performing a *mitzvah* cloaks one in the light of the Shekhinah and banishes negative desires and cravings.⁵⁹ It is the quest for *devekut* that gives the spirit within a person the strength to rule over the matter of the body, thereby willfully turning a heart full of earthly passions into an extension of the soul. This transformation is always possible, even for individuals who have become totally sunken in corporeality, since their soul is an expression of the divine light of the Shekhinah.⁶⁰

Humankind has a singular pneumatic capacity, yet one is only able to perceive God's *light* while still a part of the physical realm. True divine essence remains forever beyond the threshold of human perception.⁶¹ This might seem to incline one toward longing for death at the expense of valuing this world, and in some passages R. Hayyim does express a yearning for God that borders on asceticism.⁶² When the divine spoke directly to Israel's souls on Mt. Sinai, they were so overwhelmed with love that they

fled from their bodies in order to reunite with their Source.⁶³ This intense longing for communion with the divine even at the expense of one's own life is best illustrated by R. Hayyim's explanation of the fate of Aaron's sons in Lev. 10:1–7:

Their death was the result of having come too close to God. With great love they approached the supernal Light, and in doing so they expired; this is the "kiss" with which the righteous die. It is the same for all righteous individuals, though while the kiss comes to some of them, others go forth and pursue it . . . even the feeling of their death drawing near cannot hold them back from the dearest and most pleasant *devekut*, beloved intimacy and sweetest affection, until their very souls expire.

The nature of this [experience] cannot be grasped. It lies beyond intellectual comprehension and cannot be expressed in words either spoken or written. It cannot even be imagined. In order to understand it even to some small degree, one must remove the Evil Inclination that is holding him back. [Growing spiritual awareness] will allow one to see the signs of the accursed Inclination, and he can then nullify it and prevent it from getting in his way . . . as this ability increases within him, his soul will despise his flesh and will depart back to the house of its Father.⁶⁴

R. Hayyim's warning about the dangers of intimacy with the divine is quite powerful, but the continuation of this passage one of the most remarkable and untranslatable descriptions of mystical experience that I have ever seen. He repeats words built from the same linguistic root of *s.k.l.* over twenty times in quick succession, forging an assonantal matrix of expressions that simultaneously connote intellectual, spiritual and experiential illumination. This literary panzer-thrust must be meant to shatter the reader's assumptions about the boundaries of human consciousness; mystical communion with God is indeed possible without being entirely eclipsed within His infinitude, but it cannot be described with words as they are ordinarily used. Put differently, R. Hayyim employs language in a non-rational way to refer to an ineffable but experienceable degree of mystical attunement that lies outside the frontiers of expression.⁶⁵

The rapture of *devekut* is too powerful a siren's call for some to resist, and they surrender themselves to death's divine kiss. However, R. Hayyim's overall understanding of mortality is a bit more complicated. His remarkable interpretation of the plain-sense of Deuteronomy 14:1 will help clarify this point:

“You are children of the Lord your God; do not gash yourselves nor shave the front of your head on account of the dead.” It seems to teach us that it is no great tragedy when a person dies. This may be likened to a person who sends his son to another city on business. After a time the father sends for his son, and the son loses nothing when he leaves the place to which he was sent. On the contrary, it is a boon for him to return to his Father, who is the Source of all Life. Therefore, the verse teaches us not to rend our flesh [in a display of excessive mourning].⁶⁶

The second half of the verse reiterates that death is certainly no occasion for rejoicing, but remembering that the soul is simply returning to its natural unity with God should temper the grief we experience. Elsewhere, he likens the departure of the righteous to a precious jewel being lifted from its case and affixed to the crown of the King.⁶⁷

Given this understanding of departure from the physical world as a blessing, is there anything positive to the soul's brief sojourn on earth? In accord with a major current of the rabbinic tradition, R. Hayyim reminds us that death must always be bittersweet, for it is only this world that we are able to perform mitzvot:

“If the servant declares, I have loved my Master and my wife and children and do not wish to go free . . . he will be his servant forever” (Ex. 21:5). This verse refers to a Jewish servant who burns with fiery passion to serve his Maker. Even after his physical powers have dwindled, he still longs and yearns to serve his Master. This is the meaning of “I have loved Master and my wife and children,” which are the soul and the mitzvot that he performs in this world. He has no wish to leave the world, becoming free of obligation like the dead. This teaches us about his desire and longing for his Master. God promises such a person that he will be called a servant of the Lord and his deepest desire will be fulfilled, but not now. At the moment he has no further connection to the world. “And he will be a servant forever” means that God will chose him from amongst the angels to be His faithful servant in the world to come.⁶⁸

There is an element of sadness that accompanies the release of death. The soul is conflicted by its desire to remain in the physical world where it can serve God through observing the commandments, to the extent that God must promise it that it will be able to do so once more, presumably referring to the time of bodily resurrection. Furthermore, the brief marriage between body and spirit is mutually fructifying. On one hand, the soul is

itself refined by the time spent in a physical body. On the other, the spiritual energies with which it imbues our performance of mitzvot enable us to leave a positive impression upon the physical world around us that extends far beyond our own death.⁶⁹

In keeping with his beliefs in the cosmic centrality of man and the eternal relevance the Torah's narrative, R. Hayyim often interprets biblical passages as sustained metaphors that shed light on the dynamics of the spiritual life and the power of the mitzvot.⁷⁰ Indeed, his understanding of the relationship between the physical world, biblical text, and human consciousness dovetails with the ideal of mankind as *summum bonnum* of creation:

Know that all physical existence is but an analogue (*dugma*) for the spiritual. Just as earth needs to be worked, requiring seeding and rainfall in order to bring forth food, so must a person guard himself from anything damaging and negative that prevents him from blossoming. Today the ground of the soul, rather than the corporeal body, has taken the place of the Garden of Eden. It requires work and protection of a type befitting its spiritual nature. The rainfall [it needs] is the study of Torah . . . and the seeds are the mitzvot that one performs.⁷¹

The physical world takes on an added layer of symbolic meaning when reframed as a source of inspiration for spiritual growth. The corporeal realm has limitations, but since it is the only plane on which the mitzvot can be performed, humans can attain a level of divine awareness beyond the reach of even such purely spiritual beings as angels.⁷²

R. Hayyim frequently describes the general mystical significance of the commandments, but devotes little time to outlining their specific kabbalistic undergirding.⁷³ As we noted above, the Shekhinah literally dwells upon one who is performing a mitzvah. Paraphrasing of a teaching in the *Tikkunei haZohar*, R. Hayyim adds that the very word "mitzvah" is a permutation of the ineffable name of God; observing a commandment is thus a way of tapping into the spiritual energy held within the holiest of divine names.⁷⁴ Physical actions like bringing sacrifices return the sparks of holiness, tiny fragments of the divine splintered by Adam's sin and trapped in physical world.⁷⁵ Following God's will by performing the mitzvot can even bring one to the state of *devekut*, or intense communion with the divine.⁷⁶ In one of his slightly veiled allusions to the *sefirot*, R. Hayyim notes that "performing the mitzvot opens up the pathways of effluence

and unites the supernal *midot*,” drawing on the popular kabbalistic tradition that the commandments affect the upper realms as well.⁷⁷

Though total immersion in Torah study receives special accolades,⁷⁸ R. Hayyim writes that all mitzvot have deep mystical significance.⁷⁹ This includes those mandated by logic (such as refraining from murder), or given explicit justification in the Torah (keeping the Sabbath). Hence, one cannot be selective in their observance.⁸⁰ These reasons were revealed to Moses and his generation, but since then have been discerned only by rarefied individuals.⁸¹ Ordinary people must endeavor to comprehend the secrets according to their ability, yet R. Hayyim says explicitly that the mitzvot are spiritually efficacious even when performed with the simple intention of doing what is commanded.⁸²

Concluding Remarks

R. Hayyim ibn Attar calls to mind Whitman’s famous quip, “I contain multitudes.” As an interpreter of Torah he was simultaneously bold and conservative, innovative and traditional. He was unwilling to entertain any deviation from rabbinic norms of halakha, but believed in absolute freedom of interpretation in the realm of theology and *parshanut*. R. Hayyim was a self-proclaimed *pashtan* concerned with explaining the biblical text according to its plain-sense, yet at the same time he believed that the Torah contains infinite layers of mystical significance awaiting discovery. For R. Hayyim, the banks of the biblical text hold an endless river of possible interpretations, or in metaphor employed by the author himself, the Torah is a veritable garden of divine words ready to be sown and harvested.⁸³ He saw no contradiction between these two different exegetical modalities, and felt comfortable harnessing them alongside one another under the yoke of his pen. With these interesting points in mind, let us ask how R. Hayyim’s Torah commentary may be a significant contribution to modern Jewish intellectual life and a remedy for the rote ritual observance all too common in contemporary religious communities.

First and foremost, R. Hayyim’s approach teaches us a balanced posture navigating between tradition and innovation. He was legally conservative and humble in his reticence to declare earlier commentators on the Torah incorrect, but at the same time R. Hayyim knew that the text could and should be reinterpreted in new ways. R. Hayyim’s understanding of the nature of Torah and the flexibility of its interpretation will serve as a

useful model when asking our students to read and comment upon the Torah. Creativity is an indispensable asset that we should be cultivating, one that is often occluded by offering classes on pre-digested “hashkafa” instead of teaching our students to think nimbly and critically about our tradition. R. Hayyim’s model will foster pluralism of interpretation, without for a moment forgetting that interpretations of the text running counter to our established legal norms ultimately cannot be maintained.

Second, educators must balance another set of important goals when teaching students how to interpret the Torah and other Jewish texts: we ask our students how to plumb their words for spiritual significance while remaining ever cognizant of their plain-sense meaning. Establishing the *peshat* of a passage is necessary for determining its literal and contextual explanation, as well as understanding its halakhic reverberations. This is an essential prerequisite for seeking a verse’s deeper meaning. However, lest one object that abstract Kabbala lies beyond the intellectual palette of our students, the next stage of looking for spiritual significance need not involve recourse to opaque theosophy. As we have seen, R. Hayyim’s creative style of mystical interpretation employs the language of our kabbalistic heritage but goes beyond its complicated symbols, and his explanations are compelling precisely because they bring spiritual meaning into the realm of human experience. Concentrating exclusively on either the *peshat* or mystical at the expense of the other will be far less likely to hold the intellectual and spiritual commitments of our students than a judicious combination of the two.

Studying R. Hayyim’s commentary is a particularly useful way of sparking classroom discussions of important spiritual issues that are grounded in close textual readings. When teaching *parshanut* it can be tempting to gloss over Ramban’s terse kabbalistic references when we happen upon the words “*al derekh haEmet*,” one will still learn much from Ramban’s commentary even while ignoring his Kabbala, though a subtle and fundamental dimension of his *perush* will be lost. However, exploring the spiritual and mystical dimensions of the Torah are an integral part of *Or haHayyim* and cannot be skipped. Some of these ideas will be a freeing corrective to the skeptical and sterile hyper-rationalism found in many Modern Orthodox communities. Grappling with other mystical themes will be difficult, but ultimately rewarding. For example, the essentialist understanding of the Jewish people, our inherent division from the

nations of the world, and the negative picture of gentiles offends many of our modern ethical sensibilities.⁸⁴ It contradicts the more universalistic elements in our tradition, but is a voice that has been a part of the Jewish conversation for nearly a millennium and must be confronted. The same is true of gender imbalance found in the kabbalistic symbolism.⁸⁵ Nothing will be gained by avoiding these issues, and we have everything to lose by either sweeping them under the rug or accepting them without refusing to acknowledge their difficulties.

Students approaching the end of their high school education, whether about to go off to college or a year of learning in Israel, should first be confronted by fundamental questions such as the following: What does it mean, both practically and theoretically, to transform yourself into a dwelling for the Shekhinah? What is the Torah, and what else does it contain besides the words of its text? Given the freedom we have in interpreting the Torah, how do you know when you cross the line? What is the nature and origin of evil? Where does reincarnation fit into our tradition? What does our tradition say about life after death and the World to Come? What is the status of miracles? What is the nature of our relationship to God, and what does it mean to cleave and connect ourselves to Him? How can performing mitzvot be an intensely spiritual and meaningful experience? As they develop, our students will be confronted by questions of this type whether or not we have prepared them to think about such issues in an intelligent manner. Therefore, exploring them should be a primary goal of our educational system from the moment our students begin to think more abstractly and maturely about their religious praxis. They need a vocabulary with which to discuss matters of existential and spiritual import, and they deserve to know that it can very easily be found in the Jewish tradition.

There are several possible options for teaching R. Hayyim's work. *Or haHayyim* can be included as one important voice amongst the concert of biblical interpretation on the page of the *Mikra'ot Gedolot*. This integrated approach has the advantage of allowing students to see R. Hayyim as part of an intergenerational dialogue focusing on Torah commentary and spiritual exploration. However, many schools assign the *Torat Hayyim* edition of *Mikra'ot Gedolot*, whose publishers focused only on the works of the Rishonim and thus excluded R. Hayyim's commentary. The inclusion of important neglected commentaries like that of R. Saadya Gaon and the

careful deployment of manuscripts make *Torat Hayyim* a phenomenal tool for studying Humash, but educators should be aware that using it precludes *Or haHayyim* from having a place in their curriculum.

R. Hayyim's commentary may also be taught as a stand-alone work, perhaps as an optional *habura* to students interested in spending time getting to know his *parshanut* in greater depth. Dr. Aryeh Strikovsky assembled an excellent compendium of Hebrew language texts about and by R. Hayyim as a part of the Israeli Ministry of Education's series on culture and Torah, but to my knowledge there is not yet a North American equivalent of this valuable resource.⁸⁶ When focusing on *Or haHayyim* exclusively, some recourse to the supercommentaries composed to elucidate his text will doubtless be quite helpful; R. Isaac Meir Hazenfratz's *Or Yakar* has proven a particularly accessible and helpful guide in my own studies.⁸⁷

Finally, as a parting word, we would do well to remember that our relationship with God is the very heart of our encounter with the Torah. This is true of the written text of the five books of Moses, and it should be equally true of our study of *Torah She'be'Al Pe*. Dry sophistry and polemics should never be substituted for an honest and passionate engagement with the Torah and the search to know its Author, to the best of our ability. In R. Hayyim's words:

I trained my heart and my mind's eye on the Light of Life... and began with a prayer before the Source of all Wisdom... I titled this book "Light of the Life" because the Torah itself is called a light, as in the verse "the commandment is a lamp and the Torah is a light" (Prov. 6:23). Since light is associated with many things, such as a candle, the sun, the moon and the stars, I called it the "Light of the Life," which can only refer to the Creator of the world. . . .⁸⁸

Let us remind our students, and ourselves, that the goal of our conversations must be the quest to gaze upon the *Or haHayyim*, the true Source of all Illumination and Life.

NOTES

1. This essay is an early version of a longer academic study devoted to mysticism and Kabbala in R. Hayyim ibn Attar's commentary. Comments, suggestions, addenda, and criticism will be most welcome. A. E. M.
2. R. Hayyim ibn Attar is especially beloved in the Hassidic world. See: David Assaf, "'A Heretic who has no Faith in the Great Ones of the Age': The Clash Over the Honor of the *Or Ha-Hayyim*," *Modern Judaism* 29:2 (2009), 194–225.
3. R. Hayyim's other published works include: *Hefetz Hashem*, on the Talmud (Amsterdam, 1742); *Peri To'ar*, on *Yore Dea* (Amsterdam, 1742); and *Rishon le-Tziyyon*, a posthumous collection of his teachings in *Erets Yira'el* (Constantinople, 1750).
4. To this end, all footnotes of this article are intended to help the reader locate some of the relevant passages in *Or haHayyim* as printed in the standard *Mikra'ot Gedolot haMa'or* (Jerusalem, 1990), and are meant to be exemplary rather than exhaustive.
5. The following summary is based on the remarks of Prof. Elazar Touitou, *Rabbi Hayyim ibn Attar uFerusho "Or haHayyim" al haTorah* (Jerusalem, 1997), 13–15, paraphrased and translated here for the English reader. For a much fuller account of R. Hayyim ibn Attar's biography, see: Reuven Margoliot, *Toledot haOr haHayyim haKadosh*, as included in *Sefer Yad Or haHayyim*, ed. Eliyahu Hayyim Carlebach (Hillside, 1981). An excellent précis of his life and times in English may be found in the eponymous *Encyclopaedia Judaica* entry.
6. *Or haHayyim*, Num. 24:6.
7. For example, see: *Or haHayyim*, Gen. 1:9, *ahar sheKatavti*; 6:3; 44:18; Ex. 21:1, *asher tasim*; Lev. 25:14, *veNire*; Num. 13:19.
8. Touitou, 60; *Or haHayyim*, Lev. 19:3, *veKashe*.
9. *Or haHayyim*, Lev. 26:3, #5.
10. *Ibid.*, Gen. 46:8, *u-khedei*.
11. Touitou, 161–71. *Or haHayyim*, Gen. 7:5; Lev. 26:40; Deut. 2:20.
12. *Idem.*, 171–79. Gen. 38:1; 38:2; Ex. 12:3, *hine ba-sof*; Num. 20:8.
13. *Ibid.*, 179–85. *Or haHayyim*, Gen. 15:14–7; Gen. 25:19, *od nitkaven*; Ex. 25:9, *veRa'iti*; Ex. 39:24. For a possible instance of R. Hayyim engaging with Ramban's Kabbala, see the end of his comments on Ex. 3:14.
14. *Or haHayyim*, *hakdama*, *veKidamti*.
15. *Ibid.*, Ex. 19:9, *o yirtse*.
16. Touitou, 52, 63–68. *Or haHayyim*, Gen. 3:11.
17. *Or haHayyim*, Ex. 32:6, *od yire li*.
18. *Ibid.*, Gen. 18:4, *od yirmoz*.
19. *Ibid.*, Ex. 39:1, *od nire lefi*.
20. Touitou, 236–237.
21. *Ibid.*, 43.
22. Cf. *Or haHayyim*, Ex. 23:19.

23. *Ibid.*, Lev. 18:4, *od yirtse ma sheAmar*.
24. For only an indicative smattering of such citations from his commentary to Genesis alone, see: *Or haHayyim*, Gen. 2:3; 3:1, #3; 18:1, *od yirtse lomar*; 37:35; 46:4, *od yirtse*; 49:1; 49:3, *haNakhon*; 49:9, *veHu sod*.
25. Gen. 28:5, *vaAharei*; Gen. 47:29, *akhen*; Lev. 14:9, *u'vaDerekh remez*, Lev. 19:9, *veAmar*; Deut. 26:5, *veOmro*. The discerning reader should remember the difference between sources cited by the author himself and those inserted by editors at a later point.
26. *Or haHayyim*, Lev. 18:2, *od ulai*; Lev. 19:13, *od yirmoz*; Lev. 26:3, #33.
27. *Ibid.*, Ex. 24:11, *veUlai*; Ex. 26:1, end.
28. *Ibid.*, Gen. 1:21; Lev. 22:12, *od yesh lekha... ki kol*; Num. 20:8, *ve'haMaskil*.
29. *Ibid.*, Lev. 17:14, *veRa'iti*; Deut. 26:15.
30. *Ibid.*, Gen. 2:1.
31. *Ibid.*, Gen. 2:2, *uNire*.
32. *Ibid.*, Gen. 2:2, *u'leMa*.
33. *Ibid.*, Ex. 19:1.
34. *Ibid.*, Gen. 1:1, #22.
35. *Ibid.*, Num. 23:10, *od lefi ma shePirashti*.
36. *Ibid.*, Gen. 49:9, *akhen yitba'eru*.
37. *Ibid.*, Gen. 1:1, #22; Gen. 47:29, *akhen haKavanot*; Lev. 7:37, *leHatat*; Num. 28:2, esp. *od nitkaven*.
38. *Ibid.*, Lev. 7:37, *veKodem*.
39. *Ibid.*, Ex. 19:6, *od yirmoz*.
40. *Ibid.*, Num. 14:9, *ki lakhmenu*.
41. *Ibid.*, Gen. 28:5, *vaAharei*; Num. 28:2, *od nitkaven*.
42. *Ibid.*, Ex. 26:15, *remez*. For a few examples of R. Hayyim clearly invoking the *sefirot* by name, see: *Or haHayyim*, Ex. 25:23; Ex. 26:1; Lev. 7:37, *u'vePasuk*. In the occasions R. Hayyim refers to the concept of the *sefirot*, he more often uses the term *mida* (measure); see, inter alia: *Or haHayyim*, Deut. 28:12.
43. *Ibid.*, Ex. 6:3, *od yitba'er*; Ex. 23:20.
44. *Ibid.*, Ex. 19:20, *od yirtse lehodia*.
45. *Ibid.*, Ex. 33:14.
46. *Ibid.*, Deut. 33:2, *akhen yitba'er*.
47. *Ibid.*, Gen. 46:4, *akhen askilekha*; Ex. 25:9, *u'veDerekh*.
48. *Ibid.*, Gen. 1:1, #8; Deut. 21:11, *veHine*.
49. *Ibid.*, Gen. 1:31, *od yirmoz*.
50. *Ibid.*, Ex. 20:2, *od yirtse, anokhi*.
51. *Ibid.*, Deut. 32:8, *ve'haKavvana*; Lev. 17:10, *veNire*.
52. *Ibid.*, Lev. 22:12.
53. *Ibid.*, Gen. 28:14.
54. *Ibid.*, Deut. 28:12.
55. *Ibid.*, Gen. 1:27. In a number of places R. Hayyim describes the spiritual capabilities of non-Jews in quite disparaging terms. I have attempted to highlight briefly the pedagogical difficulties and educational opportunities presented by this unsettling notion in the conclusion of this article.

56. *Ibid.*, Ex. 21:4, *veOmro im ba'al*.
57. *Ibid.*, Ex. 33:11.
58. *Ibid.*, Num. 12:6, *hashem baMara*.
59. *Ibid.*, Deut. 21:11, *veHine kevar*.
60. *Ibid.*, Lev. 18:2, from *u'veZe navo*.
61. *Ibid.*, Ex. 33:23.
62. *Ibid.*, Deut. 6:5, *veHine haMaskil*.
63. *Ibid.*, Ex. 20:2, *od yirtse ledaber*.
64. *Ibid.*, Lev. 16:1, *o yomar*.
65. Cf. Touitou, 233–234.
66. *Or haHayyim*, Deut. 14:1. My thanks to Prof. Bernard Septimus for drawing my attention to this passage.
67. *Ibid.*, Num. 20: 1, *veNire*.
68. *Ibid.*, Ex. 21:5.
69. *Ibid.*, Gen. 23:2, *vaTamat*.
70. *Ibid.*, Gen. 1:1, #8, 20.
71. *Ibid.*, Gen. 2:15, *akhen*.
72. *Ibid.*, Ex. 19:6, *o yirtse lomar*.
73. The mitzvot of *tsitsit*, *gid haNashe*, and a few passages describing the *mishkan* are notable exceptions to this rule. See, respectively: *Or haHayyim*, Num. 15:39, *veTsviva*; Gen. 32:33; Ex. 25:23; 26:1; 26:15.
74. According to the kabbalistic system of alphabet letter combination “*at-bash*,” the first letter of the alphabet corresponds to the final letter, the second letter to the penultimate, and so on. In this case, the first two letters, *mem* and *tsadi* of *MiTsVaH* correspond to *yod* and *heh*, and when combined together they spell Y-H-V-H. See: Tikkunei Zohar, tikkun 29; *Or haHayyim*, Ex. 12:3, *vaYikehu*; Lev. 18:4, *od yirtse... ma sheAmar*; Lev. 19:2, *u'leTsad*.
75. *Or haHayyim*, Num. 28:2, *od nitkaven*.
76. *Ibid.*, Deut. 30:20.
77. *Ibid.*, Deut. 28:12.
78. *Ibid.*, Lev. 26:3.
79. *Ibid.*, Ex. 39:1, *od nire*.
80. *Ibid.*, Ex. 20:1; Ex 23:13.
81. *Ibid.*, Num 19:2, *asher tsiva*.
82. *Ibid.*, Lev. 26:3, #33; Num. 19:2, *gam nityashev*; Deut. 12:28, *od yirtse*.
83. *Ibid.*, *hakdama*, *uLifamim*.
84. For example, see: *Or haHayyim*, Gen. 28:5; Ex. 21:4, *od nire*; Ex. 31:16, *od yitba'er*; Num. 29:13.
85. See: *Or haHayyim*, Gen. 49:11, *oserei laGefen*; Lev. 12:2, *u'leZe*.
86. *Daf leTarbut Yehudit*: R. Hayyim ibn Attar: *Or haHayyim haKadosh*, ed. Aryeh Strikovsky (Jerusalem: Misra haHinukh, 2008).
87. *Or haHayyim im Biur Or Yakar* (Benei Brak, 2009).
88. *Ibid.*, *hakdama*.

Learning from the Bene Israel of India

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“*R*abbi, what will you do about the rain?” Exhausted and in shock from my first exposure to the realities of the swarming, squalid city of Mumbai, then called Bombay, I stared back, perplexed and concerned.

“Don’t you know, Rabbi, there is a drought here in Maharashtra.” Their thoughts, though unsaid, were loud and clear: “We have survived as Jews for 2,000 years without rabbis; if you can not bring rain we do not need you.”

My first internal response to the question of rain was to be incredulous. Did they really believe I could bring rain? My next thought was that there is an entire tractate of Talmud that deals in detail with what a community should do when there is not enough rain. For the Jews of India, and for that matter other peoples in the East, the spiritual and physical worlds are perceptibly and intimately intertwined. When there is not enough rain, their immediate, visceral response is to turn to the spiritual realm.

With this first question asked of me as the community rabbi of India, I realized that in many ways I would learn more about Judaism living with the Jews of India than I had from years of Jewish book study.

In the Western world in which I had grown, though quite a religious one, there was a bifurcation of the spiritual and physical realms. No matter how religious one is in the West, the worlds of spirit and matter are perceived as discrete, even if intellectually or religiously they are believed interdependent. In contrast, in the East, the interweaving of spiritual and physical is viewed as seamless and obvious.

Though I had studied *Ta'anit*, the talmudic tractate regarding drought, I could not imagine putting it so simply and pragmatically into practice; yet for the Jews of India who had not studied its words, the notion was plainly clear. This must be, I thought, part of the true Jewish meaning of Tractate *Ta'anit*, an angle less central to intellectual talmudists of my realm. So we prayed, and—lucky for me—it rained, and I was thus able to keep my job.

In 1995 my wife and I were sent by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to India; I as community rabbi and resource to the 4,000-person, ten-synagogue strong Jewish community of India, and my wife as volunteer educator.

The vast majority of Indian Jews live in the city of Mumbai, though several hundred live in smaller Indian cities such as Pune, Ahmadabad, and Cochin, each of which boasts two synagogues, several of them cavernous and beautiful, dating from the period of the British Raj. Some of the native Bene Israel villages along the Konkon coast of India still contain synagogues also. Each Indian synagogue employs a *hazzan*, a cantor, who often doubles as *shohet*, ritual slaughterer, and *mohel*, circumciser.

There are four small but distinct groups of Jews in India today, each with a unique history. The largest is the Bene Israel. According to the Bene Israel's ancient tradition they descend from seven families who were shipwrecked over 2,000 years ago on the Konkon coast, south of what is now Mumbai, in a village know as Nawgaon; home of their ancient burial ground which is still regularly visited.

This group's Maharati (the language native to the region of the Bene Israel) name was the *Shanwar Tali*, the "Saturday Oil Pressers." They pressed oil from seeds for a living, lived in villages of their own, did not intermarry with local Hindus, circumcised their children, and did something the surrounding Hindu peoples did not, observed a day off each week, a Sabbath each Saturday. Tradition holds they also said the *Shemah*, and retained such biblically related customs as putting blood on their doorpost in the spring and not leaving their homes for 40 days after the birth of a boy and 80 days after the birth of a girl.

The Bene Israel were “discovered” about 500 years ago by a Jewish merchant named David Rahabi who realized the *Shanwar Teli* were Jews and began to teach them. Subsequently, the Bene Israel came in contact with the Jewish community of Cochin, a group connected with the rest of the Jewish world via Jewish Yemeni merchants who traveled the trade winds from Aden to Kerala in the south of India. Many of these traders’ letters home and ship manifests, written in Hebrew, were uncovered in the Cairo Geniza.

The Bene Israel do not have a tradition of rabbis and so often perceived me with awe, the likes of which I know I shall never experience again. For example, one Jew said to me, “I just want to look at you, I have never seen a rabbi before.” Though the Jews of India are a tiny group in the shadow one hundred million Muslims and almost a billion Hindus, I was often asked to represent the Jewish people to Indian groups, among them the Archbishop of Bombay, the Zoroastrian community, and in newspapers and on radio.

The Jews of India are not like Western Jews, who need convincing that religion is relevant and meaningful. In India almost everyone is religious in some way, and the Jews of India just want to know *how* to observe, not why. I taught Torah regularly while dancing carefully between honoring their ancient oral tradition and customs and trying to educate them further in halakha, Jewish history, and thought, most of which had been written down long after the Bene Israel had exited the known Jewish world.

Another aspect of Judaism that I came to understand more fully through living with the Jews of India is the nature of our oral tradition. Though not all are fully Sabbath observant, the Jews of India are very pious and scrupulous. Since theirs is an oral tradition and not a written one, they do not have a black and white structure in which to precisely place the various mitzvot, as we have. The Jews of India might easily consider kissing the mezuzah on par with, or more important than, not riding in a bus on the Shabbat.

I witnessed the development of custom and law before my eyes in this almost purely oral tradition and came to realize that though an oral tradition has its weaknesses such as a less black and white sense of clarity, paradoxically one of its strengths is its consistency and commitment. The Jews of India do not look up their traditions or ritual laws in books to know its whys and hows, they just know what to do and know how and when to do it, which is their bottom line.

For example, when I discussed the Western Jewish practice of selling *hametz* for Passover they could not fathom it: “You sell your *hametz*—and then keep it in your house?” While a purely oral tradition does not lend itself to such legalistic innovation as selling one’s *hametz*, it is fertile ground for seeing in real time the organic development of custom, and it shed light for me on why custom might be the same as law in Judaism. Indeed, in such a mimetic system, gradations of importance that are often predicated on the reasons for customs (rabbinic verses biblical, law versus *minhag*) are not preserved, only the how and when of the practice it retained.

While for western Jews, books are the storehouse of Jewish knowledge, law, and authority, for the Jews of India such is not the case. Knowledge of how to follow the Torah and how to live as a Jew is embedded in their Jewish culture. We can see from their oral Jewish culture that our oral tradition prior to the Mishna was probably not so much a reciting and teaching of structured legal knowledge but the practicing of Jewish tradition organically passed from one generation into another. In such an atmosphere there is no distinction between the past and present. What is done is assumed to have always been done and is perceived to continue in its current state.

One example I saw of organically developed custom becoming law was in regard to Passover. There are no *hashgachot*, not kosher stores, no supermarkets and not much processed food in India at all. One buys raw ingredients and cooks from scratch, as had been the case in our more developed countries until the previous generation. As the month before Passover came the Jews of India gathered to bake matza in a clay oven under the watchful eye of the local hazzan. The cleaning and shopping also began, and I had the opportunity to spend a day shopping with them during the week before Passover. As I was assisting in the open market they instructed me, “Do not buy brown masala (spice mixture) only green masalsa.” When I enquired why, their answer was a curt, “Because it is Pessah.”

“Yes,” I replied “but why only green masala for Passover?”

“Why? Because it is Pessah, Rabbi,” they answered. When I suggested that maybe green masala reflects the spring theme of Passover as *carpas*, the green vegetable on the seder plate does, they answered me with a blank, inquisitive stare.

Upon investigating further I learned that brown masala is made from dried spices and green masala from fresh ones. I finally understood what I think is certainly the historical roots of this Bene Israel Passover “law.” Green masala, composed of fresh herbs would have no suspicion of being *hametz*, but brown masala whose ingredients were dried spices could have the occasional grain speck mixed in from the market in which it was purchased. When I explained my theory, I again received only incredulous looks. Indeed, the power of the oral tradition.

Later that day I entered the Jewish community office. Excited that it was ‘erev Pessah the secretary ran toward me: “Rabbi, do you want my eldest brother to dip his hand in goat’s blood for you?” she asked excitedly. “Goat’s blood?” I repeated, confused. “Yes, yes,” she exclaimed, “Passover is coming tomorrow. You know, for your door!” I looked up and sure enough, there above the front door of the office was a sheet of lined loose leaf paper with a big red bloody handprint.

Processing quickly, consciously trying to balance between respect for tradition and all I knew of Judaism and halakha, I answered, “yes, of course I would like him to,” fervently hoping she would forget to relay the message.

Before I left for India, my first rabbinical position after graduation from Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological seminary, Rabbi Norman Lamm, then president of Yeshiva University called me into his office. He related that 30 years prior he had gone to India and met with the Bene Israel. They had had one important question for him which was asked several times and he wanted to be sure I was prepared for it. He said that the answer I would give was very important and had enormous bearing for them on who they are as Jews. The question, which is hardly ever asked of me in the United States, was asked of me often in India: “Rabbi, do we Jews believe in reincarnation?”

The answer I must give them, Rabbi Lamm told me, was not a complex one drawing on Kabbala or the Talmud, but rather, a clear, “no, we Jews do not believe in reincarnation.” Reincarnation is perhaps the central tenant of Hinduism, the Bene Israel’s host culture. The Bene Israel work hard to be separate from their polytheistic Hindu neighbors while still living integrated among them. Knowing full well that much of Kabbala, philosophy, and even Midrash does accept the notion of reincarnation, I tried to muster a definitive “No!”

In addition to such customs, there is a religious ceremony which is unique to the Jews of India, the Melida. In celebration of Jewish *semahot*, five kinds of fruits and a large mound of sweet rice is placed on a decorative plate, the Melida. Blessings are made on the fruits which are then consumed by the participants and finally prayers are said which center on Eliyahu haNavi, Elijah the prophet, who is perhaps the most important Jewish figure for the Bene Israel.

Aside from *semahot* and special events, there is one other time that the Melida is held—upon pilgrimages to the spot at which the Bene Israel believe Elijah the Prophet's chariot took off for heaven. This spot, in the tiny Jewish native Konkani village of Alibag, is marked by a deep cleft in a large rock in a clearing in the village.

My wife and I merited to take this pilgrimage with the *Stree Mandl*, the women's sewing group, which has in recent years morphed into a Rosh Hodesh gathering in which they sing traditional Bene Israel songs about Jewish history and Torah in their native language. After several hours by slow bus over bumpy roads we arrived in the native Bene Israel village of Alibag. There indeed was a large rock approximately 40 feet long with a deep gouge in it, reminiscent of wheel skids, which I was told was the place of the chariot's wheels lifting off.

Coconut milk was poured on the chariot track marks and candles lit in deference to Eliyahu haNavi. We gathered nearby for the Melida. "You are the rabbi, you should conduct the Melida of course," they instructed me matter-of-factly. Though I must have missed Melida day in my rabbinical studies at Yeshiva University, I apparently did a plausible job, and the women were happy to have the rabbi facilitate the holy ceremony.

Following the ceremony the women solemnly warned me, "Rabbi, be sure when you return to America to tell the Jews there to come to Alibag, to see the Eliyahu haNavi and make the Melida." And so I have taken it upon myself at the end of every lecture about the Jews of India to admonish the Jews of America to make the holy pilgrimage to Alibag. Indeed after living in India for a year, I came to understand that one never knows, the world is a much more mysterious and mystical place than we Westerners would have it. So dear reader, I say it again now: come to Alibag, light a candle, and make the Melida. It is a mystical place.

“A Spirit of Inquiry:” Grace Aguilar’s Private Spirituality and Progressive Orthodoxy

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One of the most influential writers of Jewish philosophy, theology, and fiction during the early Victorian period was Grace Aguilar. A traditional Spanish and Portuguese Jew, Aguilar spent most of her short life living outside of a structured Jewish community. Yet her vast knowledge of biblical, and even some rabbinical, texts—as well as her highly Romantic prose—brought her works to a wide audience of both Jews and Christians. Her popular novels were read all over England and the United States, as were her works of history, theology, and biblical criticism. In *The Origin of the Modern Jewish Woman Writer*, Michael Galchinsky asserts that Aguilar “was recognized by Christians and Jews alike as the writer who best defined the Anglo-Jewish response to the challenge to enter the modern world” (135).

Aguilar’s works reflect a philosophy that merges traditional Orthodoxy with progressive thinking, elevates the role of women while stressing their domestic roles, and focuses on the individual nature of spirituality while at once identifying with a larger peoplehood. Aguilar’s traditional upbringing and theology resonate throughout her works—as do her

Romanticism and passion. It is her way of framing social and theological issues that defines her as a progressive traditionalist; a woman who, within the framework of traditional Judaism and gender roles, sees opportunities for spiritual development of men and women alike. She promotes questioning and personal biblical interpretation, as well as the evolution of the halakhic process to address contemporary realities.

In this article, I will provide a brief history of the Jews in England, laying the foundation for Aguilar's cultural environment. Focusing mainly on her work, *The Women of Israel*, I will then discuss Aguilar's views on Jewish women and their role in religion and society. Finally, I will address Aguilar's progressive Orthodoxy and her views of tradition, which are colored by an open eye to the outside world and a personal intellectualism.

Jews in England from 1270 until the Victorian Era

England was devoid of Jews from the time of their expulsion in 1270 by Edward I until 1656, when Oliver Cromwell readmitted a group of Spanish and Portuguese Jews in an effort to increase commerce. At that time, 35 Sephardic families came with one and a half million pounds in cash; the businesses of these 35 families constituted one-twelfth of the total trade in England (see Zatlin, 17). The Spanish and Portuguese community was very strong in England; this community brought with it a solid sense of tradition. Although some crypto-Jews who came to England converted to Christianity—mostly for practical reasons—the ones who didn't convert maintained an enlightened yet traditional identity. They looked to their cultural ancestor, Moses Maimonides, as an example of rational traditionalism (see Galchinsky, 26). This model of Judaism was prevalent in the Spanish and Portuguese community in England for several centuries. Unlike their German coreligionists, who felt the need to reform their religion in order to “fit in,” the more tolerant atmosphere in England did not push the Jewish community to make changes to their religion to become accepted socially.

Regarding the Spanish and Portuguese community in England, Galchinsky notes that

Sephardim in England were likely to adopt from their new host country a liberal ideology that emphasized tolerance of minority groups—indeed, some historians argue that crypto-Jews invented the ideology of liberalism. At the very least, crypto-Jews had brought with them from Amsterdam a

philosophy emphasizing skepticism, tolerance, and individual choice over communal authority. (26)

It was in this tradition of liberalism, skepticism, and tolerance that Grace Aguilar was raised.

The Women of Israel (and England)

Free to assert their right as immortal children of the living God, let not the women of Israel be backward in proving that they, too, have a station to uphold, and a “mission” to perform, not alone as daughters, wives, and mothers, but as witnesses of that faith which first raised, cherished, and defended them. . . . Let us then endeavor to convince the nations of the high privileges we enjoy, in common with our fathers, brothers, and husbands, as the first-born of the Lord, by the peculiar sanctity, spirituality, and inexpressible consolation of our belief. (*The Women of Israel*, 12–13)

During the English Haskalah, or Enlightenment period, much of the literature written by Jews in England was authored by women. Jewish women in England became popular novelists, poets, journalists, and writers of theology. Included in this group are the Moss sisters, Amy Levy, and Grace Aguilar.

Aguilar had a short—but prolific—life. Many of her novels were published after her death at age 31. She was born in 1816 in London and died in 1847 in Germany, having gone to spas there on the advice of her doctors. Her parents were of Spanish and Portuguese descent, and practiced traditional Judaism. Emmanuel Aguilar, Grace’s father, was the Parnas, or president, of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in London until the family moved to Devonshire in 1828, due to Emmanuel’s poor health.

Aguilar’s Spanish and Portuguese heritage instilled in her a deep appreciation for female storytelling as a way to preserve identity. For Jews living in Spain and Portugal during the Inquisition, religion could only be practiced in the home, in secret. Galchinsky notes that “Families like Aguilar’s who had fled the Inquisition often had a matriarchal structure: the oral traditions of the crypto-Jews were passed down from mother to daughter in the domestic space because the traditionally male Judaic public spaces . . . had been closed down” (136–137). In this tradition, Aguilar instructs mothers to pray with and tell Bible stories to their sons and daughters:

A mother, whose heart is in her work will find many opportunities, which

properly improved, will lead her little charge to God. . . . A mother's lips should teach [prayers and Bible] to her child, and not leave the first impressions of religion to be received from a Christian nurse. Were the associations of a mother connected with the act of praying, associations of such long continuance that the child knew not when they were implanted: the piety of maturer years would not be so likely to waver. (*The Spirit of Judaism*, 225)

Aguilar faced several issues as a traditional Jewish woman. First, she was denied access to rabbinical texts. Although Jews were relatively emancipated in English society, Jewish women were not fully emancipated in traditional Jewish circles. Second, she felt the pressures of conversionists. According to Milton Kerker, missionaries often targeted Jewish women, "under the perception that these were more spiritual and chafed under the shackles of a rigid, male-dominated creed" (36). Aguilar wrote, therefore, to help women stand strong against conversionist pressures. For example, in her novel *The Vale of Cedars*, Aguilar presents a heroic main character who chooses to give up the (Christian) love of her life—and ultimately suffers at the hands of Inquisitors—in order to remain true to her Jewish faith. In addition to showing resistance to conversionists, Aguilar also tells of the history of the Jews of Spain, creating sympathy and understanding of her culture and history in her readers.

What Jewish women needed, according to Aguilar, was to be strengthened in their Judaism, and to feel fulfilled intellectually and spiritually. She wrote *The Women of Israel* as an apologetic text; in it, she "proves" women's equality in Judaism—stressing that even the idea of ideal Victorian womanhood can be found in Jewish texts. Jewish women, she argues, should not be seduced by missionaries' arguments that Judaism relegates them to second-class citizens.

The Women of Israel became a very popular book among Jewish and Christian readers. It highlights some of Aguilar's theological ideas, her social values, and some of the tensions inherent in her enlightened traditionalism. In *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*, Paula Hyman notes that

Aguilar's *The Women of Israel* suggests the double-edged implications of the bourgeois gender division that placed religion and the inculcation of religious sensibilities within the female domain. On the one hand, Aguilar manifested a strong loyalty to Jewish faith and to Jewish distinctiveness; she expressed a firm belief in woman's inherent religiosity as well as in her

physical and mental inferiority to men . . . on the other hand . . . she championed women's religious education and the ceremony of confirmation for both sexes—innovations we would rightly see as progressive. (36)

As we will see in the following section, Aguilar's focus on gender in her biblical commentary is fraught with tension between women's absolute equality and their "natural" place in the domestic sphere.

Public Religion vs. Private Spirituality

Aguilar exalts the feminine, private aspects of Judaism in her work, *The Women of Israel*. When examining the lives of biblical women, Aguilar glorifies the domestic sphere as the arena of true spirituality and communion with God. For example, in retelling the story of the matriarch Sarah, Aguilar envisions a Victorian model of domesticity—who is at the same time equal in God's eyes to her husband, Abraham:

The beautiful confidence and true affection subsisting between Abram and Sarai, marks unanswerably their equality; that his wife was to Abram friend as well as partner; and yet, that Sarai knew perfectly her own station, and never attempted to push herself forward in unseemly counsel, or use the influence which she so largely possessed for any weak or sinful purpose. . . . There is no pride so dangerous and subtle as spiritual pride. . . . But in Sarai there was none of this. . . it is not always the most blessed and distinguished woman who attends the most faithfully to her domestic duties, and preserves unharmed and untainted that meekness and integrity which is her greatest charm. (*The Women of Israel*, 49)

To a modern reader, the idea that a meek, domestic wife has attained equality with her husband seems odd. Aguilar is here promoting Victorian ideals of womanhood alongside a Jewish philosophy that holds women equal in status and responsibility to men. Although Aguilar believes that women and men necessarily have different "stations," or prescribed social roles, she emphasizes women's spiritual equality, or her equality in worth as a human being in the eyes of God.

Cynthia Scheinberg, in *Women's Poetry and Religion in Victorian England*, makes the argument that "Aguilar's own distrust of the public realm of Jewish practice . . . made it impossible for her to solve the problem of Jewish women's religious agency by making claims for women's

public rights in Judaism. Instead, she claims the private sphere was the essential realm of true Jewish practice" (157). Here, Scheinberg implies that Aguilar believes that all Jewish spirituality takes place in the private realm—not just for women, but for men as well. I would argue that Aguilar actually elevates the “female” sphere above the public, “male” sphere as the site of one’s relationship with God. We see again and again in *The Women of Israel* the value of one’s private connection with God.

In Aguilar’s description of Hannah for example, she lauds Hannah’s ability to privately utter her own prayers: her poetry shows her intellect, as her poem is “a forcible illustration of the *intellectual* as well as the spiritual piety which characterized the women of Israel, and which in its very existence denies the possibility of degradation applying to women, either individually, socially, or domestically” (*The Women of Israel*, 260). Additionally, Hannah is able to enter the Temple, showing that she has equal access to holy places. Hannah’s private, quiet prayer—the first of its type—is used by rabbis as the model of prayer in general. Aguilar praises Hannah’s prayer for its quiet modesty and its feeling and intellectual composition, thus elevating a woman’s role to the paradigm of all prayers said by Jewish men and women.

Aguilar’s concern is for the private, spiritual nature of Judaism and the individual’s ability to read Jewish texts and draw use these texts to preserve and strengthen one’s identity. For example, in discussing Yokheved, the mother of Moses, Aguilar follows the rabbinic interpretation that Moses was sent to live with his birth mother until he was weaned. In these few years, Yokheved was able to educate her son and create in him an identity that would enable him to become a great leader of the Jewish people. Home, the site of maternal love and education, is glorified as the only place a Jewish woman should desire to reside and lead:

[Mothers of Israel should] follow the example of the mother of Moses, and make their sons the receivers, and in their turn the promulgators, of that holy law which is their glorious inheritance. (*The Women of Israel*, 144)

In the nineteenth century, Jewish women were not taught Talmud; they were exempt from public prayer; and they could not hold positions of authority in the Jewish community. But rather than chase after a “male” type of emancipation, Aguilar raises the “female” spaces of the Jewish woman to a higher plane than that of Jewish men. Private, personal rela-

tionships with God are seen throughout the Bible; thus spirituality should be an individual, private affair.

But while spirituality is elevated as a private value for women and men, Aguilar believes that public societal positions should be left in the male domain; women should always remain in that spiritual, private sphere. The idea of gendered public and private life can be seen dramatically in Aguilar's portrayal of Miriam, sister of Moses.

Miriam is one of the few biblical women who is referred to as a *neviah*, a prophet. She is a public figure among the Israelites; when she dies, the whole camp ceases its travels and mourns for seven days. Miriam leads the women in song after the miraculous splitting of the sea. Aguilar points to this incident and notes that *neviah* here means poet, not prophet, thus diminishing Miriam's public role in the community. Then, Aguilar focuses on Miriam's sin: speaking gossip about Moses' wife. She points to Miriam as what happens when women presume to live in the same sphere as the men in their lives, namely, they get punished for the sin of haughtiness: "Miriam sought to raise herself not only above her brother's wife, but to an equality with that brother himself; and, by the infliction of a loathsome disease, she sank at once below the lowest of her people" (*The Women of Israel*, 208). At the same time, Aguilar argues that Miriam's punishment shows women's equality to men:

Were women in a degraded position, Miriam, in the first place, would not have had sufficient power for her seditious words to be of any consequence; and, in the next, it would have been incumbent on man to chastise—there needed no interference of the Lord. We see, therefore, the very sinfulness of Jewish women, as recorded in the Bible, is undeniable evidence of their equality, alike in their power to subdue sin, and in its responsibility before God. (*The Women of Israel*, 210)

The idea of women's equality versus women's sinful "nature" and private sphere, as illustrated in Aguilar's interpretation of Miriam, is one of the tensions in Aguilar's works. Galchinsky sums up this feminist/anti-feminist tension:

In the 1860s, when women's rights debates grew strong, Aguilar's work could appeal both to feminists and to anti-feminists. Feminists could support her work as a Jewish woman's groundbreaking act of self-representation and advocacy, a stage on the way to liberation, while anti-feminists could support it as a model of modesty and domesticity. (187)

An additional tension comes from Aguilar's promotion of women's private roles as mothers and domestic teachers, while she herself tells of these ideas through the publication of books for a wide public. But this tension is an integral part of Aguilar's upbringing and philosophy. Tradition and progress must go hand in hand—in perpetual tension; consistency is of secondary importance.

In her poem, "Sabbath Thoughts VI," Aguilar expresses her private connection with God in lines 61–64:

Oh, 'tis to hold commune with Thee
To feel I am Thine own,
Thy "still small voice" would silent be
In festal halls alone. ("Sabbath Thoughts VI")

The "still small voice" Aguilar refers to is the presence of God, as told by Elijah the prophet in Kings I 19:12. Elijah seeks God. A wind splits mountains and shatters rocks, followed by an earthquake and fire—but Elijah does not see God in any of these mighty events. Then he hears "a still small voice"—and realizes that in that voice is God's presence. In this reference, Aguilar focuses on the private, quiet spirituality that individuals experience. Through personal Bible study, prayer, and intellectual development, Aguilar hopes that Jewish women can accept their defined private role and appreciate the spiritual opportunities afforded to them in that sphere. The "still small voice" of God's presence is accessible by anyone who seeks it.

Toward a Progressive Orthodoxy

A new era is dawning for us. Persecution and intolerance have in so many lands ceased to predominate, that Israel may once more breathe in freedom...the voice of man need no longer be the vehicle of instruction from father to son, mingling with it unconsciously human opinions, till those opinions could scarcely be severed from the word of God. . . . This need no longer be. The Bible may be perused in freedom... A spirit of inquiry, of patriotism, or earnestness in seeking to know the Lord and obey Him . . . is springing up. (*The Women of Israel*, 11–12)

Some criticize Aguilar's theology in *The Spirit of Judaism* as "Jewish Protestantism" and note that Aguilar's work shows a lack of deep knowledge of rabbinic texts. However, as a woman in a traditional Jewish com-

munity—where would she have found access to rabbinical texts? Scheinberg responds to the label “Jewish Protestant”:

Aguilar fervently believed that only through active “defensive” engagement with Christian culture could Jews and Judaism advance in Diaspora life; she took on this project of advancing Jewish learning despite the fact that she was excluded from traditional Jewish theology. If she sought strategies that could speak conclusively and inclusively to Christian readers, it was always part of a project of advancing Judaism and the Jewish people, a rhetorical strategy . . . rather than ideological commitment to Christian/Protestant doctrine.” (154)

I agree with this argument; Aguilar has a broad view of Judaism and its role in the world. In order to succeed in the world, to be a “light unto the nations,” Jews need to interact with their non-Jewish neighbors every day, in ways that promote the beauty of Judaism. Jewish texts, according to Aguilar—whose own writings reached many different audiences—should be read by everyone, not just to an insular Jewish group.

In his article “Jewish Religious Thought in Early Victorian London,” Steven Singer points out a new philosophy among Jewish intellectuals during the Victorian period, namely neo-Karaism. He cites Grace Aguilar as an example of this progressive wave of Jewish thought:

In her writings Aguilar continually placed the Bible on a pedestal of unquestioned authority and simultaneously downgraded the Oral Law as having little importance. For example, she declared that “the Bible and reason are the only guides to which the child of Israel can look in security . . . those observances . . . for which no reason can be assigned save the ideas of our ancient fathers, cannot be compared in weight and consequence to the piety of the heart.” [*The Spirit of Judaism*, 228] Again she criticized Jews who, “earnest in the cause, yet mistaken in the means, search and believe the writings of the Rabbis, take as divine truths all they have suggested, and neglect the Bible as not to be compared with such learned dissertations” [*The Spirit of Judaism*, 51]. (190)

Aguilar’s emphasis on shifting academic study of Judaism to the Bible and reason, and away from rabbinic texts, is not necessarily a move toward Karaism. First, Aguilar emphasizes the resources to which she herself has access; it is only natural to value one’s own path of access above learning that one does not have the opportunity to delve into. Her belief in the Bible as a source of “unquestioned authority” stems from her traditional philos-

ophy that the words of the Bible are divine. Second, Aguilar makes some very valid points in looking at Orthodox tradition—from a traditional perspective. Just because Aguilar criticizes the status quo in the Orthodox world does not, as some critics argue, make her a reformer. In fact, in progressive Orthodox circles today, these same claims are being made: There is too great a focus in the yeshiva world on the Oral Law; many yeshiva students do not have a basic knowledge of *Tanakh*, biblical writings.

Aguilar argues that “Circumstances demand the modification...of some of these Rabbinical statutes; and could the wise and pious originators have been consulted on the subject, they would have unhesitatingly adopted those measures” (*The Spirit of Judaism*, 31). Rather than reject rabbinic law, Aguilar promotes *modification*—based on contemporary realities. The process of halakhic decision-making is a fluid, changing structure. By viewing the Oral Law as “divine,” one discredits the whole nature of the halakhic process, which necessarily evolves as new realities crop up. Additionally, Aguilar notes, it is important to understand the backgrounds and biases of those rabbis who wrote the halakha: “There may be some observances which superstition and bigotry have introduced” (*The Spirit of Judaism*, 241). Looking at halakha as an evolving process, Aguilar demands an honest assessment of the origins and intellectual validity of each law as it is practiced. She thus encourages each Jew to go back to the original source—the Bible—to try to understand the essential spirit of the halakha. As a traditional Jew, Aguilar encourages a more rational, Bible- and reason-based, evolving Orthodoxy that will be rich in tradition and spirituality for men and women alike.

Scheinberg sums up Aguilar’s philosophy: “Aguilar maintains an unwavering commitment to Judaism; she constructs a theology that makes a commitment to ‘God, Torah, and Israel’ while never fully deferring to the ‘normative’ scholarly traditions of Jewish commentary” (155). Aguilar doesn’t elevate the “normative” scholarly traditions—partly because she does not have access to these traditions, and partly because she sees these traditions as evolving. Today, traditional Judaism has much to learn from Aguilar’s still, small voice—her voice of inquiry, her voice that combines Jewish theology with a respect and understanding of her surrounding culture.

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Diasporic Reunions: Sephardic/Ashkenazic Tensions in Historical Perspective

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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 Sephardic 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 over 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 Sephardic 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 Sephardic from Ashkenazic 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 Sephardic 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 Sephardic 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 Sephardic 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 “Ashkenazic” Jews and those among “Sephardic” Jews—were informed by the “modernization of Jewish life and consciousness,”⁸ perhaps better described as modern Westernization.

The approach of German Ashkenazic and Western Sephardic 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 Ashkenazic 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 Sephardic/Ashkenazic 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 Sephardic coreli-

gionists and adopted their rituals and Hebrew pronunciation. Joint worship under Sephardic 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. Sephardic leaders designated a separate house of prayer for Ashkenazim, even as the latter remained under the legal jurisdiction of the Sephardic Jewish court. Continuing religious disagreements led Sephardic leaders in 1724 to petition the colonial governor for an official separation, which was formalized in 1734, resulting in the formation of an independent Ashkenazic 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 Sephardic 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 Sephardic 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 commu-

nity was less than half of one percent of the total population in the early 1900s. These Jews, primarily of Ashkenazic 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 Ashkenazic 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 Sephardic (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 Sephardic Jews (of Iberian origin) and Mizrahim (Jews native to Arab and Muslim lands) banded together with other non-Ashkenazic Jews under the “Sephardic” 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 “Sephardic” banner—all non-Ashkenazic 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 intra-marriage 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 plainly, "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

Sephardic 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-Ashkenazic ancestry to conversion, inter- and intramarriage, or adoption.³¹ Their testimonies suggest that many Ashkenazic 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 Ashkenazic 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 Sephardic Jews, with their unfamiliar physiognomy, Mediterranean tongues, and distinct religious and social

customs baffled their Ashkenazic 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 Sephardic 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 Ashkenazic 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 sharp-

er 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 racist 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 Sephardic Jews. Thus, many or most of these Jews passed by Ashkenazic 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 Sephardic 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 Sephardic 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 Ashkenazic image of them as non-Jews or "Turks." American-born Ben Cohen, whose family had immi-

grated 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 suffix⁵⁶) 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 Ashkenazic 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 Ashkenazic 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 Ashkenazic 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 Ashkenazic 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 Ashkenazic 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 Ashkenazic majority interacting with an Eastern Sephardic 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 Sephardic family of Istanbul, whose granddaughter had fallen in love with an Ashkenazic 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 Sephardic/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 docu-

mented 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.

NOTES

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.
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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.
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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.
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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.”
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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.
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Ladino Transitions: Vernacular Religious Literature and the Modernization of Ottoman Jewry¹

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One of the earliest newspapers that appeared in Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language of the Ottoman Jews, was *Sha'arei Mizrah* (later known as *Puertas de Oriente*), published in the port city of Izmir beginning in the mid-1840s. In one of its first issues, *Sha'arei Mizrah* expressed clearly the educational agenda of the nascent Ladino press: the editor thanked the Ottoman authorities for having granted permission for the newspaper to be published and declared with much confidence that this must have been due to Sultan Abdülhamid's desire to see his subjects progress and be educated. "Being aware that the benefits of printing are such that we can learn about every aspect of science, just like the most civilized nations of Europe," the authorities had granted their support to the publication of this new Ladino journal, and its editor expressed his hope that "thus we will be able to prosper in everything" and will become "worthy subjects of such a gracious and just sovereign." These phrases represent the themes that set the agenda for the political

and cultural changes in Ottoman Sephardic society promoted by the secular Judeo-Spanish press throughout the second half of the nineteenth century: Ottoman patriotism, the desire for a regained prosperity through modern education, and the rhetoric of “civilizational progress” inspired by Western, European culture.

After their timid beginnings in the 1840s, Ladino newspapers flourished from the 1860s onward and were the most important vehicle in spreading the politics of westernization and modernization among the Sephardic communities of Turkey and the Balkans. Secular genres in Ladino literature such as the novel, adapted from Western (in particular French) literature, developed in the framework of a growing Judeo-Spanish public sphere. Historians have pointed out the significance of these secular genres of Ladino literature—and in particular of the new Judeo-Spanish newspapers—in furthering the modernization of Ottoman Jewry in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. As a force of change and modernization, these publications reinforced the effect of two other agents of change: the political-legal reforms adopted by the Ottoman state, the *tanzimat* of the nineteenth century; and the influence of the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle, which advanced its own westernizing agenda through a network of schools that it opened throughout the Ottoman Empire. In fact, if the direct reach of the Alliance was limited to a small, westernizing elite, the writers of Ladino literature and Ladino newspapers were broadcasting its ideal of modernization through westernization to an ever-increasing audience of Ottoman Jews.

If, however, we want to understand the beginnings of the modern transformation of Ottoman Jewry—its “genealogy of modernity”—then we need to go back to the beginnings of Ladino literature in the eighteenth century. If the combined effect of *tanzimat*, the Alliance schools, and a secular Ladino public sphere profoundly transformed Ottoman Jewry in the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, this transformation was only possible because the rise of a vernacular Judeo-Spanish literature beginning in the eighteenth century had prepared the ground. This early stage of Ladino literature has attracted surprisingly little attention among historians, who still tend to privilege the external forces—imperial-governmental or European—in their accounts of Ottoman Jewish transitions in the modern age. In those accounts, Ottoman Jews mostly *responded* to change, but they didn’t contribute to it. In particular, the Ottoman rabbis are usually seen as a rather

passive force, steeped in their traditionalism, and responding to developments around them but never quite being part of the story. In spite of themselves, however, these rabbis had laid the foundations for the subsequent flourishing of Ladino print culture, and thus, the traditional leadership contributed, in spite of itself, to the rise of modern Sephardic culture, including its more secular manifestations.

When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, some of the exiles appeared in Ottoman cities soon after, as early as the summer of 1492 in the case of Constantinople. The first Spanish-Jewish immigrants were followed by subsequent waves of Sephardic immigration, some of whom arrived by way of Italy or North Africa in the course of the sixteenth century, then by *conversos* who had been forced to convert to Christianity in Spain (1492) or in Portugal (in 1497) and left the Iberian peninsula in a constant trickle of emigration throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Spanish Jews brought with them their religious-cultural traditions and, given their demographic predominance in many parts of the Ottoman Empire, soon established their primacy over the local, mostly Greek-speaking Jews. They also brought with them their own language, Castilian Spanish, which morphed into a distinct form of Judeo-Spanish—the vernacular language of the Ottoman Sephardim also called Ladino. Their influence was such that Judeo-Spanish became *the* Jewish language in the Balkans and in Asia Minor, and it persisted as a distinct language of the Sephardic community even in places where the immigrants encountered a strong Arabic-speaking Jewish community, for example in Aleppo or in Jerusalem. As a matter of fact, in spite of the promotion of French literacy in the Alliance schools and the commitment to educate the Jewish public in Turkish which was professed by many Ottoman Jewish intellectuals, still at the turn of the twentieth century some 85 percent of Jews in Turkey declared that Ladino was their first language.

In spite of the predominance of Ladino as a spoken language, few books were published in Judeo-Spanish before the eighteenth century. Those that were printed—Spanish Jews had introduced the printing press into the Ottoman Empire as early as 1493—were largely directed at former *conversos* who needed vernacular literature to facilitate their return to Judaism after having escaped the Inquisition. But these texts remained marginal in an Ottoman Jewish literature that continued to be written and published in Hebrew. One author who did write in Judeo-Spanish, including

on secular topics, was Rabbi Moses Almosnino. In the 1560s, Almosnino was part of a Jewish mission from Salonika to the imperial government in Istanbul in order to negotiate more favorable economic conditions for his community. During the lengthy visit to the imperial capital, Almosnino wrote a short history of the Ottoman sultans and an extensive description of the city, all of it in the Judeo-Spanish language. His work was printed, in Latin characters—though outside the Empire, in 1638 in Madrid.

It was only in the second quarter of the eighteenth century that Ladino emerged as a language of literature. Credited with this development are primarily two figures, both living and working in the imperial capital Istanbul: Jacob Huli, who published the first volume of his encyclopedic Bible commentary, the *Me'am Lo'ez*, in 1730; and Abraham Asa, a prolific translator and author of literature in the Judeo-Spanish vernacular. Asa published the first complete Ladino translation of the Bible between 1739 and 1745, explaining the educational reasoning behind his monumental effort in the introduction to one of the volumes:

David Qimhi [a medieval biblical exegete] explains that what sustained the Jews in their exile was their ceaseless study of the Bible. And Isaac Abrabanel [a leader of Spanish Jewry in 1492] says that the reason for the expulsion from Spain was that people did not study Scripture; while they had more than five thousand rabbis of universal fame, the masses did not read the Bible.

Since most people do not understand what they are reading when they recite the biblical text in Hebrew, Asa went on to say, “the printer Jonah [Ashkenazi] wanted . . . to print the Bible in Ladino, well translated [*bien ladinado*], and including Rashi’s [classical biblical] commentary.”

These remarks by Abraham Asa capture the educational ethos of a group of writers whom I call the “vernacular rabbis.” These rabbis responded to what they perceived as the cultural decline of Ottoman Jewry and to a much broader educational ideal that developed as a corollary of the Lurianic school of Jewish mysticism coming out of sixteenth-century Ottoman Palestine. They were no longer content with a learned discourse limited to the rabbinic elite and remaining beyond the grasp of most Ottoman Jews. Instead, they developed an educational ideal that appealed to the Ottoman Jewish “masses.” The fact that Asa explicitly acknowledged the role of Jonah Ashkenazi, the printer of many of his and

numerous other Ladino works, further testifies to the close relation between an emerging group of scholars, printers, intellectuals, and rabbis who produced and disseminated a growing number of books in the vernacular language of the masses. In due course, Asa added translations from the Hebrew of the prayer book, a digest of rabbinic law, rabbinic ethical writings, and even a “History of the Ottoman Kings.”

Jacob Huli, in turn, authored what became the first in a long series of biblical commentaries and a classic of Ladino letters in the eighteenth century and beyond. His monumental *Me’am Lo’ez* was a veritable encyclopedia of Jewish knowledge, intertwining information about Jewish religious law, moral teachings, entertaining stories, and instruction on a wide array of topics within what was ostensibly a Judeo-Spanish commentary on the Bible. Huli provided a vast anthology of rabbinic tradition in an easily accessible, vernacular idiom, making it entertaining at the same time. In a similar vein, Asa produced an entire library of Jewish knowledge through his tireless translation efforts. Together, these authors (and others of their generation) gave shape to what became a new Ladino literature, which had not previously existed. What their works had in common, and what they shared with the secular and westernizing literature of modern Ladino writers in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries, was that they wanted to educate and entertain. It has been said that *all* of Ladino literature was educational, whatever the literary format or genre, and thus, long after Huli’s and Asa’s ideal of a religious revival gave way to the secularizing ideal of Alliance-educated authors a century and a half later, the basic function of Ladino literature as an educational device addressed to a popular audience had not changed at all.

It is important to note that the emergence of Ladino print culture (and the revival of Hebrew print) in the eighteenth century was not an isolated development. The same period also saw the emergence of Ottoman-Turkish print in Arabic script. Up to that point, Muslim jurists had rejected the use of print for Arabic or Turkish works. While Jews and later various Christian minorities had established their own printing presses in the Ottoman Empire before, it was only in the late 1720s that we find the timid beginnings of an Ottoman Turkish print culture. An emblematic figure in the advancement of printing in the Ottoman Empire was Ibrahim Müteferrika, who is also known as one of the first Ottoman diplomats to have advocated a new openness toward the West and the reformation of

the Ottoman military on European models. In 1726, he submitted a treatise, “The Means of Printing,” to the Grand Vizier and the leading Islamic authorities; after obtaining authorization to establish a press, he began operation a year later. None other than Jonah Ashkenazi, the Hebrew printer of Asa’s Bible translation and Huli’s *Me’am Lo’ez*, was among those credited with having helped Müteferrika establish his press. Ibrahim Müteferrika even applied to exempt his Jewish associate from the poll-tax, for he had, as he explained, “profited from the services of the Jew named Yuna [i.e., Jonah], who possesses all the important elements [needed for printing]. . . .”

What exactly was the contribution of rabbinic literature in the Ladino vernacular to the subsequent transformation, or modernization, of Ottoman Jewry? It seems somewhat counterintuitive to attribute such an impact at all to a literature that emerged precisely to bolster traditional religious knowledge among Ottoman Jews, and there is no question that Ladino rabbinic literature continued to be a conservative effort aiming at the preservation of the existing religious and social order. One of the most important contributions of Judeo-Spanish literature for Ottoman Jewish culture, however, was that it opened rabbinic literature to women—and, in fact, to all who did not belong to the educated elite. Women had been all but excluded from the traditional ideal of studying rabbinic tradition, but they were now discovered as a relevant reading audience by the vernacular rabbis. Initially, in the eighteenth century, women were still addressed in an indirect way. In one classic translated by Abraham Asa, a book called *Shevet Musar*, the author included women as a public to be instructed in Judaism, but not as a *reading* public: “The ignoramus who does not know to read,” he wrote,

should go on the Sabbath and festivals and at any time of the day to the study house to listen to words of Torah and derekh erets (proper deportment). And what he hears, he should tell his wife and the people of his household when he returns home in the evening.

The ordinary man attending the rabbis’ studies at the Bet Midrash is thus understood as a broadcaster of the rabbis’ educational message, taking it beyond the immediate audience of listeners and readers.

In the nineteenth century, the inclusion of women became more explicit. In the *Pele Yo’ets*, one of the most popular rabbinic works in

Ladino of all time, Judah Papo (son of Rabbi Eliezer Papo who wrote the original *Pele Yo'ets* in Hebrew) spelled out an educational ideal that included a female *reading* public alongside his male readers. Thus he suggested the establishment of separate women's study groups:

How good it is if women, friends and relatives, meet, one Sabbath at the home of one friend, and another Sabbath at another friend's home, and each group appoints a woman who can read and they spend the hour with [study]. One advantage is that they will look for ways to teach their daughters [how to read as well].

Significantly, Judah Papo encouraged women to learn how to read and write not only for the sake of religious study. He explicitly mentioned secular communication like reading and writing letters among the things women should be able to do. Other Sephardic rabbis who published vernacular books at the time also insisted on the importance of educating girls. Isaac Amarachi and Joseph Sason wrote, for example, that it is appropriate

to teach the daughters the holy tongue [Hebrew] and the language of the country in which one lives, and teach them to understand the prayers they say, and writing and calculus, and then teach them a profession, because idleness leads to promiscuity.

Obviously not all women took advantage of the new possibilities opened up to them by vernacular rabbinic literature, just as not all men flocked to the study sessions or read the new volumes of Judeo-Spanish rabbinic writings. But reading and study were now increasingly stripped of their gender-specific association with a male public sphere. Some rabbinic authors may very well have resisted this development, but they could not stop its far-reaching social consequences. By including women among the intended readers of their popular books, the authors of popular Ladino rabbinic literature paved the way for the emergence of a female reading public that would prove a most receptive audience for new, secular genres of Judeo-Spanish literature that began to flourish in the nineteenth century.

The vernacular rabbis did not only address a new reading audience, thus democratizing access to traditional Jewish knowledge and decentralizing rabbinic control over Ottoman Jewish reading culture. Over time, Ladino rabbinic literature also began to introduce new ideas, though it did

so cautiously. By the late nineteenth century, however, the rabbis were increasingly forced to respond to new ideas promoted in the *secular* Ladino press and literature, for which they had helped prepare a reading public—but which was now beyond their immediate control.

The explanation of lunar and solar eclipses provides an interesting example of how the vernacular rabbis moved from representing traditional rabbinic ideas in Judeo-Spanish language, then cautiously introduced new ideas, and finally responded to the open challenge of rabbinic authority presented from the outside. Jacob Huli, in the *Me'am Lo'ez* of 1730, simply presented the classical astronomy of the rabbis as it was expressed in the Talmud. According to his explanation, the sun revolves around the earth; it is in the north during summer and in the south during the winter, which allows the earth to cool. (Elsewhere, Huli cited the slightly divergent opinions of two talmudic rabbis and explains that the sun moves below the sky during the day and above the sky at night.) Writing in 1730, Huli was by no means defensive in his approach to talmudic authority on scientific issues: if Ashkenazi rabbis in Central Europe (perhaps most prominently the Maharal of Prague) had found it necessary to grapple with the implications of a heliocentric model of the cosmos back in the seventeenth century, Huli was seemingly oblivious to contemporary astronomy. In any case, Huli was not interested in knowledge for its own sake but as a vehicle to promote observance of rabbinic law and piety. In Huli's understanding, eclipses did not require a scientific explanation because they constituted a divine warning and their real purpose was to teach a moral lesson. Thus, he asserted that an eclipse of the sun was a bad sign for the entire world and an eclipse of the moon a bad sign for the Jewish people. He also gave a rather odd list of four things that caused an eclipse of the sun, for example an occasion when a great sage has not been buried according to his rank, or the sin of sodomy. In other words, Jacob Huli did not discuss astronomy for its own sake. Natural phenomena interested him insofar as they carried a divine message (such as a call for repentance), but not as something that called for a scientific explanation.

Almost one hundred years later, with Ladino rabbinic literature entering its second golden age, the situation was markedly different. Two Salonikan authors, Amarachi and Sason, wrote popular rabbinic treatises in Ladino in which they perpetuated, on the one hand, the traditional message of rabbinic popular literature. But, on the other hand, they also chose

to use their writing to educate and to enlighten their readers through exposing them to secular knowledge. Thus, for example, they pointed out the importance of smallpox vaccinations, noting that “more than a thousand children” had died in Salonika the previous year of smallpox. This would not have happened, they claimed, if everyone had listened to the rabbis, who had called for the smallpox vaccination of all children. The authors opposed popular misconceptions and ignorance, denouncing what they called “old women’s talk,” which had led the uneducated masses to doubt the importance of vaccination. If rabbis previously had explained disasters such as this one as divine punishment for the sins of the community, Amarachi and Sason now offered a rational explanation, juxtaposing the enlightenment of the rabbis to the ignorance of the masses.

In Amarachi’s and Sason’s writing, secular knowledge and rabbinic knowledge do not compete but are presented as entirely compatible. They undertake to teach their Ladino-reading public some basic astronomy. In doing so, they confidently proclaim the traditional pre-Copernican, geocentric view, which also informed the *Me’am Lo’ez*:

It is well known that the sun moves around the earth in twenty-four hours. When the sun is where we are, it is night for those who are in America, and when the sun is on America’s side, it is night for us

They claim that the talmudic sages and the *Zohar* had made it quite clear that the earth is round—“*una pelota*”—and they proudly conclude:

Behold how great was the science of our ancient sages. They had already told us about something that appears to have been discovered by the scientists through their studies, and there is nothing which is not already written or hinted at in our holy Law.

What is interesting is the fact that Amarachi and Sason take most of their scientific explanations from a Hebrew work by a Lithuanian rabbi that had been published in 1797 (Pinhas Hurvitz’s *Sefer haBerit*), translating several passages into Ladino. The Hebrew original, however, included an extensive discussion of Copernican versus rabbinic astronomy, and presented a long argument in defense of the traditional view as expressed in the Talmud. Huli, Amarachi and Sason were obviously aware of the conflict between rabbinic and scientific knowledge, yet they decided that it was irrelevant to their readers and to their educational project. In the

1840s, it seems, Ottoman rabbis still had no need to compete with a non-traditional worldview that would have challenged the authority of Jewish tradition. Instead, they proclaimed that rabbinic and scientific knowledge were compatible and that rabbinic literature was, in fact, the best way to enlighten the masses. In adapting an Ashkenazi, Hebrew work wrestling with the tension between secular and rabbinic knowledge, they chose to omit all sign of controversy.

Amarachi's and Sason's unapologetically traditional view should not obscure the novelty of their approach. Although they avoided contrasting rabbinic and scientific knowledge, they did contrast rabbinic enlightenment with popular folk knowledge and they sought to include scientific explanations into the canon of vernacular literature. Thus, unlike Jacob Huli in the *Me'am Lo'ez*, Amarachi and Sason stripped the phenomenon of the eclipse of its ominous character. Instead, they told their readers not to be terrified, adding a rational, scientific explanation based on *Sefer haBerit's* geocentric astronomy. The two Salonikan authors are thus a good example for the (certainly unconscious) revolutionary potential of Ladino rabbinic writing: they saw themselves as enlightening Ottoman Jews, appropriating scientific knowledge as compatible with rabbinic tradition and challenging what they identified as popular superstition.

A generation later, in the 1870s, the scene had changed quite dramatically. Judah Papo, in the widely-read *Pele Yo'ets*, at first sight continued in the mold of early Judeo-Spanish literature. He affirmed the traditional geocentric version of a stationary earth and the sun revolving around it. The decisive difference was that Judah Papo, writing less than 30 years after Amarachi and Sason, found it necessary to *defend* his view. What was taken as a truth self-evident to the intended reader in the 1840s, needed to be explained and justified when Papo published his *Pele Yo'ets* in the 1870s. Not only did he acknowledge that the traditional geocentric worldview of the rabbis was at odds with modern science, but he presented a lengthy polemic against those who relied on modern science instead of trusting the validity of rabbinic knowledge. Confronting a new kind of reader, Papo had now to contend with a secular, westernizing discourse promoted by the schools of the Paris-based Alliance Israélite Universelle and the new Judeo-Spanish newspapers. The modern Sephardi intellectuals who were promoting Western education and were the enthusiastic editors of numerous Ladino journals and daily papers were making their own

voice heard in a public sphere that hitherto had been dominated by the rabbis. They employed literary techniques first developed by the vernacular rabbis in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Like their predecessors, they wanted to educate, enlighten, and entertain Ottoman Jews, and they did so by presenting a secular and Western worldview as an alternative to the previously dominant rabbinic tradition.

Papo dismissed the assertions of non-Jewish scientists—in fact, unlike his predecessors, he made a clear distinction between Jewish, i.e., rabbinic, knowledge and non-Jewish, i.e., scientific or philosophical, knowledge. In the *Pele Yo'ets* he claimed that the non-Jewish scientists were not even certain of their own knowledge (and he uses this assertion to back up his claim that the readers of secular Ladino literature should return to the certainties offered by rabbinic tradition). “According to the theory of the ancients,” he says,

the sun revolved around the earth and the earth was stationary. In later generations, other philosophers discovered that the sun is stationary and the earth revolves around the sun. In later generations, yet other philosophers claimed that the sun is moving and the earth also. . . . And as it happened to the philosophers of earlier times, so it can happen to the philosophers of our day. This is to say, in the science of philosophy there is no basis and nothing is certain.

Nevertheless, it must be added, Judah Papo was ambivalent about secular knowledge and acknowledged the benefits of one of the main vehicles for the communication of this new knowledge, the newspapers. In the same *Pele Yo'ets* in which he denounced the follies of modern science, he also endorsed the usefulness of the Judeo-Spanish press for spreading knowledge among the masses. In doing so, he echoed the self-understanding of the editors of the Ottoman Ladino press.

In an article dedicated to the explanation of eclipses, the Istanbul-based newspaper *El Tiempo* (published in November 1873) challenged the traditional notion of considering them a bad omen, which had been the message in Huli's *Me'am Lo'ez*. If, in the traditional view, eclipses were ominous harbingers of disaster, divinely ordained signs warning of imminent punishment, then *El Tiempo* praised modern science as liberating people from such superstitions. In typical enlightenment rhetoric, the article affirmed: “[Science] liberates the people from darkness, it illuminates

them by sending out the rays of its light and makes them feel the heavy weight of their cloak of ignorance. . . .” The vernacular rabbis, writing in Ladino since the 1730s, could not have said it better—except that they would have substituted “rabbinic tradition” for “science.” What Ladino literature, from its outset in the early eighteenth century to the flourishing of secular genres in the late nineteenth century, had in common was its didactic agenda. The vernacular rabbis in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries set out to educate the Ottoman Jews and enlighten them through reading. Once a new, Judeo-Spanish public sphere had been created, the modern intellectuals educated in the schools of the Alliance used this same public sphere to push their own educational agenda, contributing further to the fundamental transformation of Ottoman Jewry in the last half-century of the Empire’s existence.

NOTES

1. This paper draws in part on material included in my book *Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture* (Bloomington, 2005), and appears here courtesy of Indiana University Press.

Seven Songs

JANE MUSHABAC

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I

*L*et's start with “Elohenu she-baShamayim.” It's a Passover counting song.

Most of the Sephardic songs I know I learned from my father. Until I was twelve we lived in Manhattan, but when we learned to be Americans by moving to the suburbs, we got a new activity in our lives—one that nearly all Americans practice day in and day out—regular bouts of riding in the car. For some reason, whenever my mother was driving with me over the Atlantic Beach Bridge from forays to the supermarket or to the bakery for a Jewish rye, the dashboard of our pea-green stub-nosed 1950 Dodge would smoke. The upward lilting smoke accompanied terribly tense conversations about hairstyles or other deeply painful mother-teenage daughter issues. Driving in general did not suit my mother's Bronx Turkish temperament, if you'll forgive a stereotype; it made her anxious; it did not come naturally to her. Within a few years, she rebelled entirely against the suburban life, and we moved back to the city, where she could go to Carnegie Hall or a museum in a civilized way, by subway or cab or on foot, and could get a job as a payroll secretary.

During the suburban interlude, my father, as the provider who had to drive from Long Island to his office in Brooklyn, had the better car, a 1958 two-toned blue Dodge with tailfins (!); he had acclimated far better to this American business of driving because he'd been doing it for years. As a man, he had no gendered driving dysfunction, although I did realize years later that all along he had this habit of putting his foot up and down on the gas pedal, as if he hadn't really decided yet to go forward body and soul with being a high-fueled American. One summer I took a job at another branch of his company in Brooklyn, and so we had a steady two months of car-rides to Brooklyn and back, he dropping me off on the way to his office and later picking me up. This was a good routine. During these rides, father and daughter in a legitimate business enterprise could reap all the rewards of time together, and it was not surprising that he used the time to sing me songs, or to teach me how to say it's raining in Italian (*piove!*), or the nursery rhyme by which he learned the French vowels in Turkey in 1909. The songs he loved to sing while driving were mostly those he learned from his mother. Sephardic songs belonged to women, because men sang the liturgy of prayers and blessings. Singing his mother's songs called up all the pleasures of being a treasured son. He also loved his father's blessings, and sang them at the table or at synagogue with conviction in a happy natural way, but those didn't come up in the car.

We'll get to the car songs shortly, but "*Elohenu she-baShamayim*" calls out to me first because, although my father learned it as a child, with all the excitement that followed, a world war in Turkey and the American twentieth century, he forgot the song until about 75 years after he learned it, when I commandeered my family to take a weekly class with me given by Joe Elias, the son of a Monastirli cantor, at the Hebrew Arts School on West 67th Street in Manhattan. My family included my Sephardi-looking Ashkenazi husband, our youngest babe in utero, and then in arms, and my father and mother. Although my mother had disdain for Turkish songs, which she'd grown up with from brittle heavy 78s played with unconscionable frequency by her parents, and rowdy Saturday night Turkish musical gatherings in the Bronx, she rose to join any activity that got the family together and brought social focus to the week. Our oldest son, at ten years old, along with our seven-year-old, managed to elude this weekly gathering. For an hour or so one night a week for two years, a bunch of us sat in a little circle learning songs that Joe remembered from his moth-

er and collected from women informants. He'd been a District Superintendent for the Board of Education, but his passion was the repertoire of songs that his mother knew by heart, hundreds of them, and I gather—I found this out many years later—that Rabbi Marc Angel, descended from the Jews of Turkey and Rhodes, had encouraged him to perform and preserve. My cousin, Elliott Kerman showed up also, Elliott soon founding his well-known barbershop, doo-wop, and pop Rockapella; while his group's usual fare was great snappy black t-shirt choreographed popular love and zombie songs, he was still drawn to the Zamir Chorale and Sephardic songs. Elliott's grandmother—did he know this?—my father's sister Esther, had been a beloved *kanoun* (zither) player in Turkey as a girl.

We sat around Joe's small classroom, listening to his stories, and singing through his self-published 20-page photocopied song-books, rich with Isaac Levy folk music collection borrowings and with black and white cartoonish covers showing a mustached oud player in a fez and a tall thin festively dressed woman holding high a tambourine. Joe mostly played the guitar, his foot on the chair, his guitar propped up on his knee, and especially after retiring from the Board of Education went on to play concerts here and in Israel, finding especially rapt audiences in Florida. It was a point of pride with him that he was an authentic Sephardic singer, as opposed to many people springing up on the concert circuit. He never said anything like *purity of blood*, of course, because of the phrase's provenance in Spain, but the many Johnny-come-latelies who sang Sephardic songs earned a certain dismissal from him. He was the real thing. And his son Danny played (and still plays) a superb Balkan clarinet. Joe never mentioned that a truly authentic Sephardic singer would be a woman. He had a corner on the market, and while he generously had us share in his glory—we performed at street fairs and at the Sephardic Home for the Aged—my dad and I did one song with my new baby in my arms, written up in, not the *Huffington Post*, but the *Sephardic Homes News*; and another day our middle son belted out a song with us on the Lower East Side. But Joe was the professional and a total pleasure, and we were the tag-alongs, and rightly so.

When Joe introduced a variant of *Elohenu* one evening, what a gift. Although my father's version was slightly different, here was a cherished counting song thrillingly recovered from my father's Ottoman era. My father ignored Joe's wording, more complicated and less appealing than his own, but regained a piece of his Anatolian-peninsula childhood. And once

he reclaimed it, there it was for the rest of us, for every Passover thereafter for our sons and, among others, the extended Elliott Kerman clan. I eventually created a brief song sheet for these seders; and as my father passed into his eighties and nineties, his eyebrows ever bushier, we kept up the validation of generations celebrating the same holiday with the same song. “*Elohenu*” didn’t displace “*Dayenu*,” or “God of Might,” or the Ashkenazic version of *Mah nishtanah ha laila hazeh*, but there it was:

Elohenu she-baShamayim, el dio nos yeva a Yerushalaim (the refrain, our God in the heavens will bring us to Jerusalem).

Kualo es el uno? Uno es el Kriador; Barukh Hu uBarukh shemo (bless Him, bless His name).

Kualo son los dos? Dos, Moshe y Aron, Uno es el Kriador; Barukh Hu uBarukh shemo.

Two is Moshe and Aaron. Three is our three fathers, four, the four mothers of Israel, five, the five books of the Law, six, six days of the week, seven, seven days counting Shabbat, eight, eight days for *berit milah*, nine, nine months of pregnancy, ten, ten commandments of the Law. The Spanish is so easy, the concepts so central to what matters in life, and no small thing too that the mamas numerically beat out the papas.

Kualo son los tres? tres, nuestros padres son.

Kualo son los kuarto? kuarto madres de Israel.

Kualo son los sinco? sinco libros de la ley.

Kualo son los sesh? sesh dias de la semana.

Kualo son los siete? siete dias kon Shabbat.

Kualo son los ocho? ocho dias de berit milah.

Kualo son los nueve? nueve meses de la pregnada.

Kualo son los diez? diez komandimientos de la ley.

Going past verse ten has never been of interest; ten verses are enough. And my father never talked about the 50,000 Salonika Ladino-speaking Jews murdered in the Holocaust. He was very focused on the present, and if he read the December 6, 1983 *New York Times* article Joe handed out about the horror of that decimation, my father never mentioned it. For him, a song reclaimed was a happiness reclaimed. Incidentally, I added to the song sheet the Ladino chant, when you hold up the matzah, which everyone knows in English, but here it is in Ladino: *Este el pan de la africion ke komyeron nuestros padres en tierra de Ayifto, todo el ke tiene hambre venga i koma, todo lo ke tiene de menester, venga y paskue, este anyo aki,*

el anyo ke viene en tierra de Yisrael, este anyo siervos, al anyo ke viene en tierra de Yisrael, hijos foros. My father always sang this at Passover, and I finally realized what it was and put it on our Passover song sheet. It's in Rabbi Angel's Sephardic Haggadah, be assured.

II

The second song is a one-line lullaby. I think it's a Turkish song translated into Ladino, and the words say "*Ya se va durmir*," and then the child's name. Lullabies usher a child into the sweet nether world of sleep. Joe Elias didn't know this one, and I've never seen it in a book. But the simple words are so-and-so is falling asleep already; that's it. The line is repeated three times, and then a fourth time without the child's name. I think it was my father who sang this to me at bedtime when he happened to be home on time; my mother didn't go in for this kind of stuff. But over and over again, with a modal twang, the words kept coming, lulling the child to sleep gently and ineluctably, as if someone simply made up the line as an easy way to soothe a child to rest. I in turn sang it to my children. And then when my father was on East 5th Street in Dr. Nichols's nursing home at the end of his one hundred years of life, and struggling with the inability to be his charming instructive optimistic self, I placed my cool hand on his forehead, to soothe him with *Ya se va durmir*, Victor, *Ya se va durmir ir ir ir*, Vi i i i c tor, *Ya se va durmir ir ir ir*, Vi—i ictor, *Ya se va durmir-ir ir ir*. It's possible my father's mother sang this song to me, but I doubt it. I think it was just my father, whispering like Athena into my ear, and calming me from the uproars of family life. I don't know that I actually ever heard my father's mother sing any of these songs which he told me she'd taught him. Knowing that she'd sung them to him was just a fact of my growing up, but I don't think I ever experienced it directly. The singing came down to me as a gift from her via my father.

III

And so, did I ever hear my father's mother actually sing "*Ken ve va kerer a mi?*" Probably not, but this one was definitely for the car. And soon I was wailing out the chorus along with my father, Who is going to love me, who is going to love me, *Sabiendo ke yo te amo y me muero de amor de ti*,

knowing I love you, your love is the death of me, as if the greatest questions of life were decided in Ladino driving on Flatbush Avenue, famously the longest street in the world, or so said my father. But it was the song she sang most often, he told me. Who is going to love me, you're abandoning me for another woman. Why such sad lyrics, why such a tragically bitter song when my father's father was truly a good Jewish man, and my father's mother such a well-loved joyful woman? *Yo me acodro de aquella noche, cuando la luna me enganyo* (I remember that night when the moon tricked me!). Why did she take such pleasure in those lines? The song said, She fell in love, and the man abandoned her. And my father's mother sang it with zest and force of spirit! Why?

Ethnomusicologist Dr. Judith Cohen tells me this song was not from medieval Spain (people erroneously think most Sephardic songs are from medieval Spain—forget it!). Probably instead, she said, *Ken me va kerer a mi* was one of many modern songs that appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Spain and reached Ottoman Sephardic communities “through touring Spanish singers, and perhaps on the ‘new’ phonograph machines. Istanbul,” says Judith, “was a very early center of the recording industry.” We can picture that the song became very popular. The feisty woman's complaint emboldened popular singers, who began to make their way across the cultural landscape with aplomb. The very idea of a woman's song must have lit up women's lives and made a lament into a complaint, capturing all the intention of a woman's purpose-driven hectic domestic life to survive in tough times, even with sunny Turkish skies above. Who is going to love me, you tricked me, you abandoned me for another woman, you know well I have a son, he was born from that misery, I was so disgraced even my mother abandoned me, tomorrow night I'm going to make my way with my son to the salty sea, to throw away all my sins, because I know that I am going to die. None of it was true to my father's mother's circumstances. It was the very differentness that appealed. Above all, this was entertainment—and entertainment before technology took over and made women singing while cooking a thing of the past. But the feeling of heroism in the angry singer made this song a live rebuttal to whatever might face her on the horizon, whether a great war at home, or transporting herself and her husband and six children across the seas to a new land.

IV

The fourth song is famous, “*Arboles*”—Trees Cry for Rain. This was a great car song. Readers probably know it. *Arboles yoran por luvyas, montanyas por ayres* (trees cry for rain, mountains for wind). Then my father and I sang it at my parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary party. We sang it at the microphone to the gathered guests. I was newly pregnant with my third child and we sang in Ladino, Trees cry for rain, so do I cry for you, my beloved. Come hither, my beloved, come, come see me; I want to speak but cannot, my heart sighs. Come hither, my beloved, and we’ll unite—*aunaremos*! See that word *una* in the middle of the Spanish word *a-unaremos*—let’s become one.

Now here’s the thing about this song. It’s so famous that there are books named after it, and videos. The internet and YouTube have many versions of it. But there’s a chorus that my father never sang. It’s a key part of the song, but my father never sang it, and neither do we: *Penso y digo, ke va ser de mi? En tieras ajenas no puedo bivar* (I think—I ask—what will become of me?—I cannot live in foreign lands). It’s easy to imagine the song is about the expulsion from Spain, or about leaving beautiful Turkey when there was no way to make a living there. How can we sing in foreign lands? My father never wanted that lament—or maybe his mother simply never sang it, and he’d never heard it. *Arboles* for him was simply a love song. There was something poignant about my father wanting to sing that song, when his relationship with my mother was stormy and vexing. But, as always, joy was uppermost, celebrating a fifty-year marriage and children and grandchildren represented the best happiness. My husband and I and three sons sang *Arboles* at our eldest son’s wedding this August at a state park in Oregon. *Enfrente de me, ay un angelo, con dos ojos me mira. Avlar kero i non puedo, mi korazon suspira* (an angel stands before me looking at me with her beautiful eyes, I want to speak and cannot, my heart sighs). Hello and welcome to our new daughter-in-law.

V

At many weddings, a famous song that gets many women onto the dance floor is the *Misirlu*. Women, and often men too, get up to join this Greek dance, a single line winding in and around the dance floor. I get up with them, but for me, the *Misirlu* is first of all a song. My father’s mother was

quiet and soft-spoken in her old age, while my mother's mother could be brash and mean, although always interesting, and excited about being in the world. My brash mother's mother used to sing the famous Greek song about the alluring Egyptian girl, *Misirlu*. It would be bedtime and my sister and I would be in bed, and I'd call her and say, Grandma, sing us *Ach ya habibi* (that's the refrain, but also the title we used for the song). She'd come in, a big woman with stature and a Turkish hauteur, she'd sit down in my room on the edge of my bed with all her many bangle bracelets on her arm. She'd get a diva-ish Turkish puckering of her lips, and start with a low mysterious sweetness,

*O polimo I gli casu imay ya (my little bird, you're sweet),
O polimo I gli casu imay ya
Ach ya habibi, ah ya haleli, ah (my dear, my beloved, o my love),
Mono no si klepso (I will steal her away)
Mam aptin ara pia (from Arabic lands).
Aah, a-ah ah, ah ah ah, a a Ah, Misirlu.*

This grandmother in front of the house once when she didn't realize that I, a little bit of a thing, was right behind her, stepped back landing hard on my foot. Grandma, I piped up bravely, you stepped on my foot. Don't you say you're sorry? From the perch of her grand height, she glanced around and down at me, and pronounced magisterially, You're lucky I didn't press. I was. But at bedtime, I'd say, grandma, do the head thing. She'd sing a little, put her arms up over her head, her arms with her twenty bangle bracelets, as her head slid forward and back like a belly dancer's, awing her grand-daughters in pajamas. It's clear most people are cheated and unaware that *Misirlu* is a song, one of the richest in the world's repertory. Its haunting sensual melody has long been famous, used in many movies, like *Pulp Fiction*. Let's not get this wrong. This is not a Ladino song, but a Greek song. Sephardic songs include French, Greek, Turkish, and Hebrew songs. What they reflect is a predilection to make the entertainment of singing a part of daily life, in whatever guises or languages or occasions present themselves.

VI

As I said, my mother didn't hold much truck with Turkish or Ladino music. She decided early that the patriarchal unfairness inflicted upon her

by her father was attributable to Judaism itself. She certainly didn't want to buy into that worldview at a time when American culture was sweeping women into the future. She found the Metropolitan Opera elevating, a key to the future somehow of the savvy woman. She went with her brother and sister-in-law and took my father along to all the operas, and bought the librettos, those soft gray-clad somber treatises on women's tragedies and comedies sung into high-class art.

But there was one song that made her laugh. It would pop out of her without her thinking about it, because it represented a salty rebelliousness that fit her refusal to be brought up a second-class citizen as a girl. The song was "*La Vida Do Por El Raki*." That means I'd give my life for raki, a potent licorice-flavored brandy, and my mother was all too happy to sing its pleasures and the raffishness it liberated in her from the tight constraints she felt her father represented, for instance: no college, you're a girl. So she could sing it and feel Free! Rakish and raffish, she'd sing *La vida do por el raki, no puedo yo desharlo, de beber nunca me arti de tanto amarlo* (I give my life to raki, I can't stop drinking it because I love it madly.) Of course, it didn't matter that her father loved the song as well, her mother too. It threw everyone in together to a great need for singing, for the wish to be free of impossible constraints. *Kuando esta en el baril, el no avla del todo, kuando me ago yo kandil, ago bayuos de lodo* (when it's in the barrel, it doesn't say a thing to me, but when I'm drunk, I go down in infamy). *Me siento yo ijo varon, me siento yo primario, sin tener liras en el kashon, me siento milionario* (I feel myself a young man, I feel myself top dog, without liras in the cashbox, I'm a millionaire). *La vida do por el raki*.

VII

Here's the seventh song, "*Oseh shalom bimromav*." At our youngest son's bar mitzvah, after my mother and I did the *hamotzi* (this was unusual, but fine), my father asked me to remain at the front of the gathering. So there he and I stood, and when he began singing "*Oseh shalom*," I joined in and everyone joined in. It's that way with the important songs. We know them. We know them well, from our whole lives. "*Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleynu, ve'al kol Yisrael ve'imru amen*." The song is simple and short. No one has to think, do I know the words? It's right there. Here's how Rabbi David de Sola Pool translates it, "May He who creates

the harmony of the spheres, create peace for us and for all Israel: and say ye, Amen.”

Coda

My mother’s name was Estelle or Stella, like the word *Estrella* pronounced *Streya*, meaning star, and although she was a difficult impetuous woman, no one could help loving her force of spirit. So another song reminded us of what she was about, “*Streya Biva*,” which ends very differently from the songs in which the lover throws herself tragically into the sea. “*Streya Biva*” is a new addition to our family songbook. My middle son took it up from our reconstructed Ladino song sheets this year and sang it at a little dinner for my husband and me and his friends, as a surprise for us on a special occasion. When he was a child, I said, I’ll tell you what I want for Hanukkah. Work with grandpa and learn the long blessing that he sings on the first night of Hanukkah. What scarf or book or even jug of honey could compare with that most perfect gift? He got it just right, and, many Hanukahs since my father died, my son has launched into it quietly, bringing light unto the nations, bringing a sense of calm and connectedness. This night at dinner, he sang “*Streya Biva*.”

Tu sos una streya biva, abaxada de ariva, si venites a tomarme, en tus brazos abrasarme, en tus brazos abrasarme. (You’re a living star, descended from above, if you come to take me, you’ll take me in your arms to embrace me).

Las tus karas koloradas, la dulsura ke me dates, komo ti ya no ay otra, ni aki ni en Evropa, ni aki ni en Evropa (your cheeks are rosy, ah the sweetness you bring me, there’s no one like you, not here or in Europe).

Las tus ojos son brilyantes, parecen dos diamantes, arelumbras korazones, de donzeyas y barones, de donzeyas i barones (your eyes are like diamonds, lighting up the hearts of young girls and young men).

Sos yena de ermozura, venida de la natura, en tus brazos me tomates, a la kama me yevates, a la kama me yevates (you are beautiful, your beauty is natural, you took me in your arms to bed, in your arms you carried me to bed).

The Power of Foresight: Reflections on the Future of an American Sephardic Community

LARRY AZOSE

(Larry Azose is a second generation Sephardi of Turkish and Rhodosli descent living in Seattle, Washington. An entrepreneurial businessman passionate about his Sephardic heritage, he has embarked on a second career in Jewish education focusing on fostering a stronger Sephardic awareness within the greater Jewish world.)

“Who is wise? One who sees the future outcome.”
Talmud, Tractate Tamid 32a

This famous talmudic statement challenges us to critically examine past and current issues, identify patterns and trends, conduct a thorough analysis, and if wise enough, act to achieve future desired outcomes. However, this approach demands that we be honest and realistic in our assessments, and not be encumbered or influenced by nostalgia or Golden Age thinking.

All Jewish communities are dynamic organisms. Each community grapples with similar challenges of engagement, outreach, growth, membership retention, leadership, and financial stability. Sephardic communities in North America are faced with these and more complex issues regarding their survival. Members of established Sephardic communities have become integrated into American society in the same manner as other Jewish groups who immigrated at the same time period. Over the

last decade, the emergence of new Sephardic congregations reflects a demographic composed mainly of recent immigrant groups, primarily from Israel. In today's globalized world, these recent immigrants do not undergo the same American Jewish experiences as did the immigrant groups who arrived a century ago. The older second- and third-generation communities are now in a state of flux as they either undergo existential transitions or are at the point of losing their identity to these new incoming groups.

Seattle's Sephardic community, which has long enjoyed a reputation as a bastion of the rich cultural heritage, religious customs, and liturgy of Judeo-Spanish Jewry, is one such community concerned about its future. Founded in the first years of the twentieth century, the community traces its roots to immigrants from Turkey and the Island of Rhodes. It is served by two synagogues, each reflecting its place of origin, a jointly run religious school, an independent summer camp, and the Seattle Sephardic Brotherhood, whose primary purpose is to serve as the *hevra kadisha*, the burial society. Seattle is also the birthplace of many leading rabbis and educators serving other Sephardic communities, including Rabbi Marc Angel, founder of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

While no longer spoken as a living tongue save for some favored words and expressions, Ladino is still incorporated into many features of synagogue prayer services and holiday rituals. Our unique customs and liturgy have been successfully maintained so that were our great-grandparents to enter the *kehillot* during services, they would feel most at home. We are fortunate that our grandparents and other learned community leaders taught us after school and through ritual observances at home. This informal educational infrastructure ensured the continuity of our traditions for my generation and for some, will continue to the next generation as well.

Although the majority of Seattle's Sephardim are not strictly observant religiously, with many having have joined Conservative and Reform congregations, there is still a sense of belonging, friendship, mutual respect, and a shared pride in our heritage, traditions, and legacy within the overall community.

On many levels, the Sephardic experience in Seattle is no different from other American Jewish communities in their striving for affluence and acceptance. Attrition, assimilation, and intermarriage have taken their toll. Many families whose grandparents were traditional two generations

ago are now completely assimilated. There is evidence of disengagement from communal institutions and a lack of interest in both Jewish and Sephardic identity.

Whereas the primary portal of engagement for our parents and grandparents was the synagogue, this is no longer the case. For the majority, their relationship with the synagogue is extremely tenuous, not meaningful or spiritually fulfilling, and is based almost exclusively on their filial devotion. Synagogue attendance continues to decline, even on the High Holidays, and for most Sephardic Jews, their only other connections to their Jewish identity are annual food bazaars or lifecycle events, mostly sad, where clergy are required to officiate. As the older generation passes away, there is little doubt that these connections to identity will suffer even more.

The Seattle Sephardic community has for the most part not benefited from Hansen's Law, "What the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember" or "the principle of third-generation interest," as stated by the historian Marcus Lee Hansen. Hansen's Law is often used to interpret the immigrant experience. Whereas the children of immigrants may devote considerable energy to discarding immigrant culture traits such as religion, their children may find them meaningful and identity-forming.

Nor has the community received any significant benefit from the American Sephardic renaissance in the 1970s, driven by the formation of the American Sephardi Federation and Sephardic House. This phenomenon was eclipsed by the organized development and empowerment of Sephardim in Israel. Our own inability to successfully create and maintain an organizational infrastructure on a national and local level also played a major role in its failure to have a lasting impact on the community.

Those who are committed to an observant lifestyle are faced with the additional challenge of the allure and attractions of the vibrant Jewish lifestyle and multiple resources that larger communities such as New York and Los Angeles have to offer their children. Although some young men and women have returned to Seattle to raise their families, the trend to move away will continue.

More vital are two issues that confront not just Seattle, but the majority of second- and third-generation Sephardim in general—intramariage and the lack of articulating what differentiates Sephardim from other Jews, and ultimately, the relevance of Sephardic Judaism (or Sephardism, to use the term coined by Rabbi Marc Angel) and identity in the future.

Intramarriage with Jews of non-Sephardic backgrounds has resulted in some cases of blended families with a diluted sense of their Sephardic heritage and customs. The educational emphasis in these families is placed on fostering, promoting, and maintaining a strong Jewish identity. This priority is shared by many Sephardim who marry other Sephardim, with the result being a lesser emphasis on Sephardic heritage. (Some communities, mainly those of Syrian and Persian origin who live in tightly-knit neighborhoods, do not yet face this problem, and, given their significant numbers and insular nature, may never do so fully).

In essence, this will be the Jew of Sephardic lineage in the post-ethnic Jewish world. Given the fact that Sephardim are vastly outnumbered, coming generations will be completely absorbed into mainstream American Jewish life, leaving their Sephardic heritage little more than a fond memory.

Hence the larger questions loom. What will those memories be composed of? Will they consist only of liturgy, ethnic music, exotic cuisine, and *joie de vivre*? Are there really unique Sephardic values? Is there such a thing as a Sephardic ideology or (since no Ladino counterpart exists) *Weltanschauung*? Can it be that Sephardism arose in a unique milieu, and since that setting no longer exists, there is little of substance that remains relevant or transmittable? As one young man, a member of a blended family with a non-Sephardic spouse put it: "We know we are different. We just don't know how."

If there is something unique about the values that constitute Sephardism, can they be defined, distilled, crystallized, and articulated so they can be transmitted to future generations?

Many claim that what distinguishes Sephardim is our unique approach to modernity and life. We possess a set of values and worldview that allow us to navigate and enjoy the best of both worlds, maintaining our Jewish identity, Torah values, and traditions as we straddle past and present. Our hallmarks historically have been moderation, non-judgmental acceptance, and tolerance of others' levels of observance. But today, many branches of Judaism, most notably the Modern Orthodox and the Conservative Movements, espouse similar ideals and approaches.

There is much we can be proud of. We have made invaluable contributions to both the Jewish and non-Jewish world. The writings of our great Sephardic sages in the areas of thought, philosophy, liturgy, *piyyut*,

Torah interpretation, mysticism, and halakha have been recognized and incorporated into the greater general wisdom of Torah. In particular, past Sephardic rabbis are now being hailed for their bold, innovative, and even daring halakhic rulings and approach to dealing with modern concerns and dilemmas, especially in the current stricter religious environment. Contemporary opinions advocate that a Sephardic approach can resolve many of the current issues plaguing the Jewish world and the State of Israel. In the secular world, Sephardim are known for their contributions in the arts, literature, sciences, and philosophy.

Seattle's Sephardic communal future is predictable. We know that through intermarriage, assimilation, attrition, and intramarriage the community will continue to decline. It will lose its unique identity and hallmark of "community." Eventually, Ladino will be eliminated as we come to realize that we would rather speak words we understand than words we do not. There will no longer be Sephardic synagogues, but synagogues in the Sephardic tradition. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that we have failed to identify and train spiritual leaders from our own ranks and background to guide the community's future.

To counter this decline, there are a number of specific things that Seattle's communal leadership can do. The creation of a community council would serve as a vehicle to bind the different organizations. Communal strategic planning would create a master plan to guide future development. A community-wide genealogical project can be implemented to identify those of Sephardic heritage and serve as a means of creating a database for outreach. Cultural events can be created to provide additional entry points to engage the disinterested and disenfranchised. If done in context within a vision, there is a chance that the community can be rejuvenated.

However, if we cannot articulate a set of values and worldview and devise educational methods to transmit them to future generations, it would appear that we too will suffer the same fate as the majority of Judeo-Spanish communities around the world. We will be remembered solely for our quaint *minhagim*, soulful liturgy and melodies, and delicious food.

Rabbi Marc Angel, in his excellent book, *Foundations of Sephardic Spirituality*, makes the following assessment:

Judeo-Spanish civilization has reached its conclusion as a living, dynamic organism. There are no more communities in the world where Judeo-

Spanish is the mother tongue of the younger generations and there is no sociological reason for Judeo-Spanish communities to emerge in the future. . . . The Judeo-Spanish community has made vast contributions to Jewish life and lore, yet it now enters a new phase in the fulfillment of its distinctive mission. In this phase, its central teachings and experiences will be translated and incorporated into the general wisdom and culture of the entire Jewish people. (Angel, 176)

Through the lens of foresight, we are empowered to become wise and shape the future. Seattle is the last vibrant Judeo-Spanish community in the United States. Eventually though, it will undergo a complete transformation as its constituency evolves and factors beyond its control take over. Will we use our insights to ensure that our treasured Sephardic legacy remains relevant and transmittable or will we fade into the twilight as a footnote on the pages of Jewish history?

An Evolving Sephardic Identity: Striking a Balance in an Age of Cultural Diversity

RACHEL SOPHER

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After planning for a relaxing vacation—and my first trip to Europe—I recently traveled to Spain. In preparation for the trip I read up on Barcelona, the city where we would be based, and asked friends about where to find kosher food and how to manage in a country where the Jewish presence was all but invisible. Once in Spain I happily took in the sites, the architecture of Gaudi, the Picasso museum, and the rich local culture. On the last day of our stay, a fellow traveler organized a day trip to the ancient city of Girona, birthplace of the Ramban and home to The Jewish Heritage Museum of Catalonia. We hired a tour guide to take us through the museum and the old Jewish quarter of the city, excited by the prospect of familiarizing ourselves with the history of the Jews of Northern Spain. But my excitement quickly turned to disappointment as I realized that the museum and our tour guide were geared toward serving the general Spanish populace, an overwhelming percentage of whom were completely unacquainted with Jewish culture. As we walked from room to room, and our non-Jewish guide explained the basic rituals of the Sabbath and the Mikveh to our group, my heart sank; I found myself feeling the connection to and loss of the rich Sephardic culture of Spain, all traces of which have been destroyed in the years since the expulsion of the Spanish Jews.

I was surprised by the rush of feelings sparked by the return of awareness of my Sephardic heritage and shocked by the way I had come to Spain with a total lack of concern for any historical connection. I have always taken particular interest in Sephardic culture and tradition and had studied the history of the Jews in Spain in college, spending hours reading up on its famous figures, the Rambam, Yehuda Halevi, Ibn Gabirol. Gone was my idealization of the Golden Age of Jewish Spain; gone was the pride in my connection to this romantic past. As our group walked the narrow streets of the old city of Girona, I pondered the obliteration of the Jewish presence in Spain and its parallel, the disappearance of my Sephardic heritage from my mind. The trip left me identifying with the Jews who were forced to leave Spain during the Inquisition in my own analogous experience of cultural expulsion and left me wondering about my fickle relationship to my Sephardic roots.

As I pondered the questions brought up by my experiences in Girona, my thoughts led me to a consideration of the role of Sephardic tradition within a larger Jewish identity. Sephardic Jews comprise but a small and diverse subset of the greater worldwide Jewry, constituting what some might call a minority within a minority. Sephardic Jews in integrated communities face challenging choices when it comes to consolidating coherent religious and cultural identities. Navigating differences within a richly multifaceted group can be an intricate and formidable undertaking. How can an individual hold on to his unique background while remaining in close contact with a broader and more prominent culture?

It is a complicated venture to negotiate individual difference while retaining membership in a distinct overarching body. Sephardic Jews make up a heterogeneous subset of the Jewish world. The religious commonalities among different types of Jews are significant enough to provide an umbrella identity, a link through common history, religion, and values, though this broad-ranging identity is largely defined by the more dominant Ashkenazic culture. To make assumptions about what it means to be Jewish is to accept stereotypes represented by Ashkenazic traits and to be gently folded into many broad expectations about what it means to be Jewish. Yet Sephardim are different enough culturally to warrant a discrete though overlapping classification. For many Sephardim, self-identifying as a Jew without cultural qualification can be a gratifying and connecting experience, one in which our commonality breeds deep affiliation; but this same prospect may also carry the risk of divergence and alienation, a gulf

in experience that could lead to an emphasis on isolation or estrangement in the symbolic renunciation of difference. This conflict speaks to a question of identity; how can we celebrate our similarities and embrace differences without slipping into an extreme position?

In a very personal way, this theme and variations on it have informed my relationship with religion throughout my life. Sephardic culture and tradition permeated my early experience to such extensive proportions that for some time their influence remained vague in the way that the most basic things about us remain indeterminate, a shadowy presence as an identity taken for granted in the naive assumption that this is just the way things are. At that time, in an uncomplicated way, the insularity and homogeneity of my family and community life contributed to a strong sense of what it means to be Jewish, and more specifically what it means to be a member of a Sephardic family and community. These circumscribed sensibilities pervaded my day-to-day existence, organizing my experiences, and as such were ingested with the ease and passive receptivity of a child being fed on mother's milk.

Some of my earliest memories revolve around my paternal grandparents, my Nona and Papoo as we called them; their house was the heart of our family, the hub around which all of our lives revolved. Sitting on the floor as Nona entertained family and community members at her endless afternoon *kavehs*, I was indoctrinated into a special society, one in which vivacious connection infused earnest and sincere relationships. The women would sit around and *echar lashon*, chatting animatedly with each other for hours on end. Language peppered with Ladino sayings and punctuated by uproarious laughter filled my ears while heavy, ethnic foods reminiscent of the old countries of Rhodes and Turkey filled my stomach. This robust umbilical tie to the old country developed in a sensorial and visceral rather than explicit way that grounded our family, providing a sense of belongingness and safety that pervaded my early cultural identity. For us, family was everything; and being in our family was inextricably connected to what it meant to be a part of a vibrant Sephardic tradition.

This aspect of my identity gradually became more complicated as the field of my experience inevitably widened to include the more dominant traditionally Ashkenazic conventions and practice. What had once been an implicit and unacknowledged understanding of Sephardic identity slowly became explicit as frank comparisons and contradictions brought my experiential world into the more broad-ranging Jewish arena. Mine

was a naive understanding of Jewish identity, lacking direct consideration and focal attention. When a child is raised in a particular culture, she goes through an unconscious process called acculturation; this is the means through which a person passively takes in the values and behaviors that are suitable and necessary in that culture. Developing a more extensive and complex appreciation of one's culture means reevaluating the basic values inscribed in childhood, assessing their relevance and then making conscious choices about their personal meanings. This process is one in which a person of any age can adapt to another culture. People raised in diverse environments can compare cultures and consciously adopt characteristics that suit them. These choices can be based on personal preference, but it is more likely the social and environmental pressures that convince a person that the behavioral norms of one of the cultures work more smoothly or achieve goals more effectively in any given circumstances. Because of the human tendency to accommodate to one's milieu, identity can change and gradually evolve, to become an authentic reflection of an individual sense of self within a shifting multicultural context.

Of course, this process requires cognitive capacities that develop over a lifetime. As children, we are capable only of simple psychological operations, and thus conflicts around identity generally give rise to black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking. In this uncompromising manner of reasoning, differentiation is experienced as a danger; this threat can generally be dealt with by denying difference through the merging and denial of particularities, or alternatively, by flaunting the superiority of one's own culture, in a chauvinistic denial of the validity of the other. These stances comprise opposite sides of the same coin, in that they involve holding on to rigid, categorical assumptions about the need for strict coherence within groups.

In every society in which diverse cultures meet, minorities face strong pressures to give up aspects of their identities to conform to the more dominant standards. Those of us who live in the United States and other Western countries have all experienced the pull of assimilation and the ways we are passively induced to forgo difference in favor of blending in with the larger group. Aside from other influences, our history as subjugated minorities has prompted us to integrate with more powerful cultures in acts of adaptive identification. The permeable boundaries between Jews of different backgrounds frequently leads Sephardic Jews to conform to

the more prominent Ashkenazic group, though in its extreme form, this adaptation can mean giving up meaningful aspects of self. It is often easier to fit in than to assert divergence or cultural distinction.

On the other extreme is the culture that is intolerant of others. Sephardic Jews can at times experience anxiety about the loss of their tradition, especially as more time and more generations widen the gulf between current conventions and the customs of the old countries. Though this is a valid concern, in its extreme it can lead to defensive rejection of otherness. In this case, difference is experienced as a threat to cultural identity and thus can lead to a xenophobic posturing, shutting others out through attitudes of self-protective fanaticism.

These strong reactions to alterity are more common than one might think and represent the Scylla and Charbidis of diverse, multidimensional societies. It is human nature to think in extremes and we all fall into these traps of oversimplified lines of thought at various times in our lives. These inflexible positions allow us the comfort of avoiding conflict, both internally and externally. Denial of difference short-circuits nuanced understandings of human relationships and diminishes experiences of self-identity. Acknowledging contrasts means facing discord and possible friction within our environments. However, this conflict is the source of much cognitive and emotional growth. As our experiential spheres expand into wider and more diverse concentric circles, our inner worlds become more complicated. Enriched by new perspectives, our understanding of ourselves and of others deepens, creating opportunities for a broader range of choices and more fertile interrelatedness.

As a child I found myself confusedly oscillating between these two extremes. At home I heard about the importance of Sephardic culture and the need to assert a strong Sephardic identity. This position directly contrasted with the mentality I faced in my predominately Ashkenazic school in which the Eastern European traditions were assumed as a baseline of commonality among students and teachers. It was not uncommon during my elementary school years to bring some information learned at school home only to find that it did not correspond with my family's traditions as Sephardic Jews. Alternatively, highlighting the differences in my background from those of my Ashkenazic peers and mentors at school often brought uncomfortable feelings of difference; teachers with heavy workloads and packed curricula do not always welcome interruptions regard-

ing individual differences in students' customs. Through dealing with the tensions between these environments, I began to establish a patterned response to the contexts in which I found myself. I learned to accommodate differences in perspective and when to assert my cultural particularities and when to remain more unobtrusive.

As this happened, I gradually established a relationship to my identity as a Jew that incorporated some Sephardic and some Ashkenazic traits, though because of my perception of Sephardim as a marginalized community, I tended to hold on more tightly to the unique experiences of my Sephardic upbringing, asserting their validity in the face of what felt like a threat to their legitimacy. Mine was a somewhat militant outlook, particularly in my youth when I was unable to conceptualize the feelings of conflict surrounding my identity.

As I grew older and was better able to formulate and communicate some ideas about my experience of difference within these cultures, my viewpoint softened. I heard from others, both from inside and outside of my community and began to integrate a more balanced understanding of the nature of one's relationship to her individual heritage. Through this dialogue, I realized that having access to both Sephardic and Ashkenazic cultural identities could widen my frame of reference and enhance my religious life; I developed a more balanced bicultural Jewish identity, feeling freer to express myself and more open to input from others. As I learned that we can acknowledge differences and survive, I slowly gained confidence in the legitimacy of my unique background and this confidence allowed me to better hear outside perspectives without feeling threatened.

However, this balance was context-dependent and evolved as my sensibilities and attitudes toward myself and my surroundings fluctuated. In more recent years, the ties to my early upbringing slowly began to fade. My Nona and Papoo passed away, and with the loss of their presence in my life, it was more difficult to sustain my connection to the experiences of my youth, inextricably tied to my experiences of myself as a Sephardic Jew. With their deaths I began to question the need to hold on to what felt like a dying tradition. I no longer lived in the Sephardic community I grew up in, and without the connection to that community it became more difficult to hold on to a culture with less direct reinforcement in my life. I began to think of the Sephardic community of my youth as a fading culture and Ladino as a dead language. I began to question the strength of my

allegiance to my Sephardic background and my motives for asserting this aspect of my Jewish identity.

These changes in my experiences and perceptions of Sephardic Jewish identity, in conjunction with my desire to protect my own children from facing similar conflicts in their senses of who they are as Jews, led me to gradually give up some of my commitment to the singularity and uniqueness of my early Jewish background. It is my belief that my discordant experiences during my trip to Girona were the culmination of this protracted and somewhat unconscious disavowal of my Sephardic heritage, the return of which faced me with a shocking crisis in identity.

But this does not have to be the end of the story. The flood of feelings I experienced during my trip to Spain made me aware of a part of myself, a part that I truly value and that I had been denying for some time. It is inevitable that we fall into one extreme or another at various phases of our lives. This is part of what it means to live within two cultures. But we can use these opportunities to develop an integrated understanding that is personally meaningful. My experiences in Spain helped me to better clarify exactly how I feel being a Sephardic Jew at this point in my life—a feeling that, until that time, had remained much out of my awareness. As a child, I took these things for granted, as essential parts of myself, not realizing the ways we are subject to change. Though there is some loss in giving up this childish purity of understanding, what we get in return is a far richer, multifaceted, and multidimensional connection to our Jewish heritage.

My Sephardic identity still plays an important role in my life. While I am concerned about its future in the face of assimilation to Ashkenazic standards, as well as the normative values of American culture, this concern need not lead to a regressive pull toward the creation of rigid boundaries. I believe that the meaning lies in the process, the journey toward achieving a balanced perspective that is reflective of personal significance. What we pass on to our children are not only concrete traditions and teachings, but also the ways we relate to our religious identities. As our children see us grapple with creating balanced religious and cultural selves, they can identify not only with our specific heritage but also with our struggle to remain true to ourselves while respecting difference in others. Although there is a risk that the minority within the minority that constitutes Sephardic cultural identity will become watered down with such an outlook, I have faith that our children will be able to forge their

own relationships to religion, striking their own balanced relationships as Jews. Having an open point of view does not mean forsaking your roots; we don't need to give them up, but can continue to take pride in our traditions while respecting those of others in the true spirit of loving thy neighbor.

A Sephardic Sojourn in the Caribbean

BONNIE WASSERMAN

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I spent the spring semester of 2011 lecturing on Brazilian Culture and researching Caribbean film as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of the West Indies at Cave Hill in Barbados. This opportunity also allowed me to study a subject that has interested me since high school—the outcome of the Sephardim who left Portugal for the New World. In addition to Barbados, I wanted to visit the communities on two other islands, Curaçao and Jamaica and see the famed sand floors of their synagogues. As a Portuguese scholar fascinated by the Judeo-Spanish tradition, I sought to find out if these languages were still used in the services or spoken by descendants of the early Sephardic settlers. Furthermore, as I am intrigued by the history of colonization, I wanted to understand under which European powers the Sephardim were granted the most freedom religiously and economically, and the effect of colonization on the situation of those Jews today. Having grown up in the Midwest where intermarriage is common, I also wanted to see how the Caribbean Jewish communities addressed this issue. Ultimately, I wondered if the Sephardic experience on the islands offered a key to the overall survival of Jews in the Diaspora.

Although I am an Ashkenazic Jew by heritage, my interest in Sephardim stems from having been a high school exchange student in

São Paulo, Brazil. At the age of 16, I went to live with a family in South America's largest city. Their origin, however, was Recife, Pernambuco, and I discovered later that they had chosen me because they thought they were descendants of Jews who had lived amongst the Dutch. They were excited to have me in their home and always treated me with respect, asking question about my faith—although their family had not practiced it for centuries.

After attending college, where I became fluent in Portuguese, I returned to Brazil and traveled to the Northeast, where I visited the area known to have been the first Sephardic community in the Americas. At the time, the synagogue on Rua Bom Jesus (Good Jesus Street) had not been restored, nor its *mikvah* excavated. Still, I was amazed at how the visit spurred in me the desire to trace the path of the Sephardim both to their source in Iberia and then to the New World.

My formal education intertwined perfectly with my project. I earned my first Fulbright Scholarship to go to Portugal in 1994–1995 as a graduate student doing a dissertation in Portuguese at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Although my official research was on the Lusophone or Portuguese African Diaspora, during my time off I went around the country looking for signs of the Sephardic Diaspora. I was a regular at Shabbat morning services at the main synagogue in Lisbon, Shaarei-Tikvá, where I became friends with a Scottish Jew who took me to Belmonte, one of the only villages that has practiced a form of Secret Judaism for over 500 years. I was amazed by Belmonte's Jewish history, especially the importance of women in maintaining rituals within the home, as synagogues were prohibited and men could not openly show their faith. I learned that the community had first been breached in the early twentieth century by a Russian miner who happened to be in the region and discovered that the Belmonte Jews considered themselves to be the only Jews left in the world. Only when he said the *Shema* did they believe that he, too, was a member of the faith. How did the Belmonte community survive for so long, even under the harsh threat of the Inquisition? This community lived in a very isolated region of Portugal, the Beira Alta or Upper Beira, which was hard to reach. They pretended to eat the foods that non-Jews ate by making recipes using chicken instead of pork. The "alheira" or garlic sausage was one such delicacy eaten in the region. Most of all, they regulated the community through marriage. Sometimes people of the same family would

marry—such as first cousins, though there may have been even closer connections such as uncles and nieces. As a result, birth defects were not uncommon in that community.

In addition to Belmonte and the synagogue in Lisbon, I traveled to the Alentejo, Portugal's southern breadbasket. There I visited places that no longer had a living presence but rather street signs such as "judaria" where the Jews were once forced to live. Overall, I found that few people in Portugal knew much about Jewish ritual or religion. After nearly a year living in Iberia I, too, felt a little isolated as a Jew and looked forward to leaving.

I did not forget my experience searching for remnants of a Sephardic past in Portugal, and although I eventually earned my doctorate and moved to New York, my interest in learning more about their journeys continued. In the fall of 2010 I presented a paper in London on nineteenth-century Sephardim of Great Britain, and then two weeks later flew to Singapore to lecture on the Jews of India.

By the time I left Barbados to start my teaching and research, I was exhausted and looking forward to the opportunity of living in the tropics. Before arriving on the island, I had learned that there were two synagogues, both Ashkenazic. On my first Friday night I went to a hotel and asked if they had any information on religious services. The concierge immediately put me in touch with Rose Altman, who, at 88, was the oldest member of the Jewish community. She had all the information I needed regarding the synagogue and even more about the people who attended it. I learned that during the hot summer months, people went to a house that was turned into a synagogue for practical reasons—it had air conditioning. In the winter some of the community, now numbering a few dozen families, and tourists many from cruise liners, go to the newly renovated Sephardic synagogue, Nidhe Israel or "the Scattered of Israel."

My first Kabbalat Shabbat service was memorable. I entered a thick gate and walked past two buildings, one I learned was a state-of-the-art museum dedicated to the history of the Sephardim and the importance of sugar cane, a crop brought over by the Jews of Recife. There was also a *mikvah* that actually has a spring-fed well. I noticed two cemeteries, with neatly arranged gravestones lying horizontal on the ground. Looking closely I could see that the headstones had inscriptions in a variety of languages; Portuguese, Spanish, Hebrew, and English. Carved cupid figures

and hands chopping down trees adorned some of them. When I saw people moving into the synagogue, I went in, too, looking for the women's section. After seeing men and women sitting together, I sat down on a wooden bench and admired the building. The interior was beautiful, with a grand reader's desk in the middle of the room with four pineapple shaped carvings symbolizing the tropics. There was a balcony, though it went unoccupied. An Israeli man in his mid-40s led the Conservative-style service and afterward there was a small Oneg Shabbat in the back. A couple of women served cake and soda, greeting the members and guests.

Over time I got to know some of the Barbadian Jews, the pride they felt toward the synagogue as well as the difficulty they had maintaining the community. The structure was refurbished in 1987 on the site of a synagogue originally constructed in 1654 and rebuilt after it was destroyed by an 1831 hurricane. By the second decade of the twentieth century, there were no longer Sephardim left on the island and the synagogue was closed, its religious articles sent to England in 1929. In the 1980s the post-colonial government wanted to use the property for a courthouse but Paul Altman, a descendant of the Polish Jews who had arrived on the island in the 1930s, led efforts to preserve and renovate it. Though the ancient artifacts were never returned from London, there are several Torahs in the Ark and the community is relieved that its future on the island is secure. The building has also become a major tourist attraction bolstered by the Barbados National Trust, which organizes lectures on Sephardic history and leads tours around its grounds. Yet, those who actually attend services know that fewer and fewer members show up. Inter-marriage is considered a major problem, and over the years it has broken up quite a few families. As a result, children are often sent overseas to boarding schools, usually in England or Canada, with the hope that they will find a Jewish spouse. But it does not always work because those raised on the islands sometimes feel more of a kinship with non-Jews in the Caribbean Diaspora and end up marrying outside the faith—to the dismay of their parents.

The second island I visited was Curaçao, in the western Caribbean. I had just received an extension on my scholarship to attend a Caribbean Studies conference in Williamstad, which offered me a wonderful opportunity to see the Sephardic synagogue there. Getting from Barbados to Curaçao in the Lesser Antilles islands was not easy, and my "island hop-

ping” by way of Trinidad took hours. But the trip was well worth it. Curaçao was so much different from the former British island I was living on. First of all, the climate was arid; instead of palm trees and green brush, there were cacti everywhere. The architecture of Williamstad, the capital, was colorful, lining an inlet crossed by a moveable pedestrian bridge.

I went to the Sephardic synagogue, Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel twice during my stay on the island. The first time I visited a museum that was in the courtyard of the synagogue. It proudly displays religious artifacts that had been used by the community through the centuries. There is also a memorial to George Maduro, a young man who went to Holland to help fight the Nazis during World War II and was killed in Dachau near the end of the war. Molds of gravestones saved from a large cemetery affected by the acid rain from a nearby oil refinery line the outside walls. These feature some of the same carvings as the headstones in Barbados, though one featured a hand with four fingers split, reminiscent of a blessing by a Cohen. In addition to the permanent collection, there was a recent exhibition, “Keys to My Heritage,” which featured keys that were saved by Sephardic Jews who fled the Inquisition.

A few days later I went back to the synagogue to attend Shabbat services. Walking into the stately synagogue, which dates back to 1732, I was amazed by its mahogany interior, blue stained glass windows, and sand-covered floor. I thought about the reasons given for the sand—to remind us of the years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert or the attempt to muffle the sounds of prayer in fear of the Inquisition. As in Barbados, I looked around to see where I should sit and noticed that there were women seated alongside men. Joining them, I took a prayer book and began to follow along. Though the people around me spoke accented English and Dutch, the rabbi sounded as if he came from the United States, and at one point during the Torah service read a prayer in broken Portuguese. I was surprised to hear the language that I had studied since high school. After nearly 400 years, the Caribbean Sephardim did not forget the idiom spoken by their ancestors in Iberia. After the services there was a celebration for the children who had just finished another year of Hebrew School. Taking turns, each child, both girls and boys, climbed to the reader’s desk and gave thanks to their teacher for another year of learning. I was impressed by the fact that there was a school catering to the next generation, small as it was.

Once the service was over, the congregation gathered in a community hall across the courtyard. There was a Kiddush, and people talked to one another about the upcoming summer. I asked a few people some questions regarding the Mikvé Israel-Emanuel and learned that it was a combined congregation of two synagogues that had split during the mid 1860s when the Reform Movement was sweeping Judaism in Germany and the United States. Decreasing membership led the two to join together in the 1960s using a combination of traditions from both. The Sephardic community went through another, more extreme change in 2000, when it became egalitarian, thus allowing women to participate in services and sit alongside the men. Not all were in favor of this, and some joined the Ashkenazi synagogue on Curaçao, Shaarei Tzedek.

My visit to Curaçao made me think of the difficult choices that Jews everywhere make to continue their traditions. Combining synagogues and deciding which prayers to keep or omit during a service was not easy. Nor was the decision to become egalitarian, a move that divided the community and is still a divisive issue. Yet the members of this community still revere their heritage and invest in the next generation's education. One of the major concerns they have is intermarriage and a majority of children study abroad in the Netherlands, England, or the United States. As in Barbados, this does not ensure that they will marry within the Jewish fold, but at least they will have a greater opportunity to do so given that the community numbers around 115 households, or 350 members.

Once I returned to Barbados, the last trip I planned in my Sephardic Caribbean sojourn was Jamaica. Having received an invitation to visit the island from Ainsley Henriques, a leader of the Jamaican Jewish Community, I decided to go in July. Jamaica, like Curaçao, fascinated me because I had heard that it still had a Sephardic "essence" to it—as opposed to Barbados, which had become completely Ashkenazi aside from its Sephardic synagogue building. Attending Shabbat services in Kingston, however, showed me how the traditions could evolve with the influence of different colonizers and peoples. For example the synagogue itself, Shaare Shalom, is a large, white colonial style building with sand floors. People of various ethnicities worshiped together in a style that to me was reminiscent of the British Protestants who once ruled the island combined with what Mr. Henriques described as "Sephardic liturgy and music." After services there was a Kiddush, where I noticed that the atten-

dees were somewhat older, though some were accompanied by grandchildren from abroad. As Mr. Henriques gave me a tour of the museum, which also serves as a community center, I looked at photos of earlier community presidents from a different era. Now, only 200 Jews are affiliated with the United Congregation of Israelites—though it is quite active for its size. There is a Hebrew School, Hillel Academy, as well as a home for the aged, synagogue sisterhood, and B'nei B'rith. A new rabbi was hired in September 2011, and international groups help maintain the nearly 23 cemeteries around the island. The United Congregations of Israelites is also committed to educating both visitors from abroad and local Jamaicans about the Jamaican Jewish heritage. Each year hundreds of school children visit the center to learn about the important contributions made by Jews to the island country.

My time on the islands ended in August 2011, and since then I have thought a great deal about my visits to Barbados, Curaçao, and Jamaica. I traced the remnants of the Sephardic communities from Portugal to Brazil to the islands—imagining the difficulties they must have faced as they tried to survive. What I found was that there was something in common—something that Jews everywhere could learn from. First of all, numbers matter. A community will have a difficult time surviving if its members leave en masse or completely assimilate into a host nation. In the case of Barbados, the entire Sephardic population had disappeared by 1929, either through intermarriage or emigration to other countries, such as Canada and Great Britain. Curaçao and Jamaica have both seen their young go abroad and not return or marry non-Jews. Secondly, rifts between synagogues need to be put aside in order to stabilize the population. In the case of Curaçao, decreasing numbers forced the communities of Mikvé Israel and Emanuel to join together after a century-long split, although the decision to have egalitarian worship prompted some members to leave the community once again. Jamaica also formed the United Congregations of Israelites. A third factor is the education of the young. Both Curaçao and Jamaica have Hebrew schools for their children, so even though the children often leave when they reach high school or college age, their children will have a Jewish identity. Thus, assuming that politics and economics are conducive for thriving Jewish communities, a minimum population committed to education and cohesiveness is essential for Jewish communities to remain viable in the Diaspora.

The Counter-Directions of the Sephardim

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The Sephardic approach to . . . life is characterized by *hessed*, optimism and a spirit of inclusiveness and hospitality.

The Sephardic tradition is compassionate, tolerant, and sympathetic to the human predicament.

— Rabbi Marc D. Angel¹

In his 1990 novel, *Mr. Mani*, Israeli author A. B. Yehoshua anchors his historical exploration of the formation of modern Jewish identity in several pivotal experiences: the despair and fatigue of the 1982 Lebanon war, often called Israel's "first war of choice"; the first *Intifada*; the failed hopes for an Arab-Israeli peace; and the escalating terror attacks on Israeli civilians.² Yehoshua posits that an ominously self-destructive pathology exists in Israel and that it has resulted in the nation's extended periods of "oppression, defamation, persecution and martyrdom."³

The novel explores the impacts and implications of Jewish attitudes that to a large degree have shaped the past and that are likely to impact the present contours of Israeli identity unless fundamental changes are made. At its foundation, *Mr. Mani* questions the role of religion and nationalism in the formation of Israel and the modern Middle East.

In Yehoshua's view, Israel has a self-destructive heritage that manifests in the Jewish people's desire to retain their identity as a nation while at the same time resisting the responsibilities of creating and maintaining an independent national existence within distinctly defined territorial boundaries. Israeli society, Yehoshua implies in *Mr. Mani*, has failed to achieve the dreams of its Zionist Ashkenazic founders and resembles other Western societies in many ways. The salient aspects of the Zionist effort to shift the center of Jewish existence from Diaspora to Zion constitute a contemporary transformation of the Diasporic conviction that the continuing cohesion of the Jewish people is not predicated on their adherence to particular territorial and communal bounds but rather on their peoplehood.⁴

Taking this idea one step further, Yehoshua proposes that an alternative, a bicultural Sephardic Zionism, would be more constructive, and that Israeli society would do well to free itself from the more narrow Ashkenazic and Exilic heritage, which he sees as no longer appropriate in the present state-oriented situation. To that end, the cross-culturalism of the Sephardim and the idea of the Sephardim as the link between Jews and Arabs are prominent themes in *Mr. Mani*. Yehoshua centers on the Sephardic identity and the Sephardic response to historic events to emphasize what might have been rather than what is the present situation in Israel. The Sephardim in this novel are portrayed as cosmopolitans, whose worldliness has allowed them to remain free of the ravages of ideology and free to glimpse historical options and the turning points of history not seen by others. At the same time, the Sephardim's susceptibility to obsessive notions and obsessive desires prevents them from making an impact on history; indeed, it puts their very survival at stake.⁵

Mr. Mani focuses on the hidden realms of the individual psyche embedded in its familial, social, and cultural context. At the same time, the novel addresses ideological, political, and ethical issues, and questions the very tenets of Israeli society: Judaism, Zionism, religion and nationalism, the Israel-Palestinian conflict, and anti-Semitism.

Certainly a Sephardic response to historical events in Israel, conditioned by the pillars of the Sephardic identity and a different attitude toward Arabs, would have resulted in a distinctly different situation in Israel. Such an inquiry involves an intellectual game of "what if": What if Arab-Israeli relations had taken a different course and the many conflicts between these two peoples had been averted? Yehoshua adds the Sephardic angle to this "what if" exercise when he bemoans the marginal-

ity of the Sephardic community in the early days of European Jewish settlement, when the ultimate fate of the region was being forged.

To develop this “what if” argument further, it is helpful to understand Yehoshua and his insights into the Sephardic identity and his own experiences as a Sephardic Jew and how these are expressed in the novel’s plot and themes. This essay reviews the Sephardic counter-history after a discussion of the crossroads of history portrayed in *Mr. Mani*, and it explores some of the reasons Yehoshua chronicles the Israeli counter-narrative of the last 150 years through such a dysfunctional family and why the Sephardic relationship with the Arabs offers a distinctly different framework for the State of Israel.

A. B. Yehoshua

Yehoshua, one of Israel’s leading writers and recipient of many literary prizes, was born in Jerusalem in 1936. *Mr. Mani*, his fourth book, was greeted with universal critical acclaim in Israel and the United States. Yehoshua’s books have been translated into 26 languages, and many of his stories and novels have been adapted for the theater, cinema, television, and opera,⁶ demonstrating their wide appeal.

Unlike most prominent Israeli cultural figures, Yehoshua was born into a Sephardic, rather than an Ashkenazic, Jewish family. Indeed, he represents the fifth generation of a Sephardic family on his father’s side and the first generation on his mother’s side. His father, Jacob Yehoshua, an Orientalist by training, wrote a number of books recounting the life of the Sephardic community in Jerusalem from the end of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, and two books on the Palestinian press of that time. His father’s work served Yehoshua well in *Mr. Mani*; Jacob’s occupation with the language, history, and culture of the Palestinians probably opened Yehoshua’s eyes to the unique plight of Sephardic Jews, and thus indirectly influenced his worldview. His mother, Malka (née Rosolio) came from a wealthy Francophone Moroccan family whose members immigrated to Palestine in 1932, and she, too, had a strong influence on Yehoshua. She ensured that he had a secular education and was exposed to Zionist ideology and to a moderate Sephardic version of Jewish tradition. Thus, both his mother and father contributed to his preoccupation with the complex theme of identity, which underlies all his writings.⁷

After some years in Paris and a return to Israel and following the Six-Day War and its ensuing upheaval, Yehoshua became involved in left-wing movements and started publishing essays that elaborated on his ideological and political stance. His active participation coupled with his intellectual and rhetorical skills have made him one of the major spokespeople for the Zionist left wing and the Israeli peace camp, both at home and abroad.

The writing careers of A. B. Yehoshua and his father reveal an interesting parallel: Jacob turned from his scholarly preoccupation with the history of the Palestinian Arabs to the Sephardic community of his childhood after his own father's death in 1955. The son turned more openly in his fiction to Sephardic characters after Jacob's death in 1982.⁸ Jacob's identity as a Sephardic Jew was not meant merely to signify his difference from Ashkenazic Jews but was also bound up with Spain itself, which he regarded as the original source of that identity. Within his extended family, Jacob spoke the Judeo-Spanish language, Ladino, which gave him a sense of carrying living genes of the true Spanish language.⁹ In the spring of 1987, A. B. wrote an introduction to his father's sentimental, nostalgic recreations of his Jerusalem childhood. In that introduction, he investigates the complex, if often repressed, nature of his own Sephardic identity through a fusion of three themes, which foreshadow *Mr. Mani*: "Yehoshua's relationship to his father, his attitude to his Sephardim, and the type of fiction he produces. . . . We . . . see in this essay of 1987 some of the same basic structures that shape *Mar Mani*, which was written about the same time."¹⁰

Yehoshua's Reflections on the Identity and Experience of the Sephardic Jew

In "Beyond Folklore: The Identity of the Sephardic Jew," Yehoshua asked why a man like himself, a thoroughly secular Israeli steeped in Western culture, whose principal identity was as an Israeli, a man with no particular connection with the Spanish language or culture, defined himself deep down as a Sephardic Jew. He then noted that in many of his novels, characters appear who may be identified as Sephardic Jews. These include the five generations of central characters in *Mr. Mani*, who stand at five critical crossroads in the history of the last 150 years, and each time, at each crossroads, another Mani is offered an historical or political option that is not, in the end, realized.

In Yehoshua's opinion, this Sephardic identity contains—overtly or covertly—Christian, Muslim, and Jewish elements that are blended in the memory of a wondrous and powerful cultural symbiosis, real or mythic, during a Spanish Golden Age in the first centuries of the second millennium. The three-way dialogue during that period also produced highly significant and influential texts. Therefore, even after the Christians took absolute control of Spain and made it into a strictly Catholic country, there remained within Spanish identity a recollection of that strong symbiosis, which even after the expulsion of the Jews and the Muslims continued to murmur beneath the surface in Christian Spain.¹¹

When the Jews left Spain and moved to Muslim countries in North Africa, the Christian element, the Christian memory, remained in their identity as well despite the absence of Christianity in their immediate surroundings. Similarly, Jews who moved to such Christian lands as Italy, Southern France, or even Holland, retained a whisper of Arabic culture and Islam in their identities even when there were no Muslims or Arabs in the vicinity.

Yehoshua explained that the special quality that is preserved in Sephardic identity is its ability to include the Other even when he is gone and forgotten. The consciousness of the Other became a structural element that enriched and fertilized Sephardic identity, even as the reality of the Other became foggy and ultimately vanished altogether. This internal element developed into a kind of cultural gene, strengthening its carriers' capacity for tolerance and pluralism. The wistfulness or nostalgia for the vanished Other was handed down from generation to generation, for hundreds of years after the expulsion. This sad, nostalgic mood permeates folk songs in Ladino, the language whose very existence nourished Sephardic identity even when the languages actually spoken by Sephardic Jews in other countries were different. The subconscious existence of the absent Other in Sephardic identity—whether that of the Muslim as fellow exile or of the forced Jewish and Muslim converts who stayed behind in Spain—made the Sephardic Jew heavier of heart but also more tolerant. Yehoshua noted that religious fanatics are hard to find among Sephardic Jews. Such zealotry did develop among Ashkenazic European Jews, who had to struggle against doctrinal Christian animosities, both Catholic and Protestant, and against Jewish secularization, which became a threat in the modern period. However, such ideological secularization, by and large, was not a factor in traditional Sephardic societies.¹²

Yehoshua spoke of what he calls “Mediterranean-style pluralism,” one of whose unifying components is the Sephardic Jew, who carries in his soul that vanished Other, the Christian and the Muslim. This is the Sephardic role; this is its mission. Not merely Ladino love songs or folkloric foods or Sephardic melodies and modes of prayer in the synagogue, but a political and cultural mission. A mission of peace and tolerance, addressed first and foremost to the Arabs of the Mediterranean, a mission with which Israelis who are not Sephardic are also likely to identify.¹³

The Mediterranean basin was the cradle of the Sephardic Jews, who gave us the most memorable poetry of the Golden Age in Spain. However, the oldest community of Jews in Jerusalem, the Sephardim, declined alongside the onset of Zionism and modernity. The early harbinger of this process appears in the middle of the nineteenth century: Rabbi Alkalay (1798–1878), the Sephardic rabbi who preceded Pinsker, Herzl, and Ahad Ha’am. His name is rarely mentioned today.¹⁴

Yehoshua discusses his relationship with his Sephardic past in an essay, “Remembrance of Sephardic Things Past,” included in the anthology of his father’s essays published in 1987 and in his second essay collection, *The Wall and the Mountain* (1989). In relating the influence of Sephardim on his writing, Yehoshua wrote:

I felt I could no longer dominate a text with the kind of figure that represents the Israeli in general or the Ashkenazi Israeli of the center in general. And this was my way of approaching reality: little by little, I discovered the Sephardic element that I had repressed a little and didn’t want to touch in my earlier writings. I discovered the Sephardic element in my own identity and tried to use it as a way to penetrate through to my human soul and to the Jewish experience through my own biography. And I think this is the way I came . . . to *Mr. Mani* itself.¹⁵

In discussing what his Sephardic roots meant to him personally, Yehoshua stated:

Of course it is . . . a return to some of my own sources and to the possibility of being courageous and admitting some of my sources . . . by engaging Jewish history from a Sephardic point of view . . . I very much wanted to understand this Sephardic element—Sephardic not in the sense of the Oriental Jew, but in the sense of a Sephardic Jerusalemite of the nineteenth century.¹⁶

Mr. Mani

Mr. Mani reads like a frontal assault on the mystique of Sephardim. Playing with the conventions of the family saga, Yehoshua's novel gives equal attention to five generations of a family of Spanish exiles who emigrated from Salonika to Jerusalem in the middle of the nineteenth century. The cultural and historical description is thick, and the will to engage the meaning of Sephardim unmistakable.¹⁷

Mr. Mani is also a direct assault against the nationalists and fundamentalists in the war for memory, hence the soul and future of his nation. Yehoshua's way of engaging in this battle is to dive deeply into the historical and mythological past of the Jewish people. His purpose, in writing the book, "is to understand the present." He is insistent that *Mr. Mani* ". . . is not a historical novel"¹⁸—even though it covers 150 years of history. The present, he says, is the target. "I feel that Israel is at a crossroad, between war and peace, and I want very much very much to understand that crossroad."¹⁹

Yehoshua does not believe *Mr. Mani* is a novel of ideas. Rather, the essence of his idea is that Israel's collective past impinges on its collective present. He feels that before ideology, before Jewish history, before the crossroads of Jewish history, one must try to explore the unconscious material that comes from fathers to sons and from grandfathers and great-grandfathers to ourselves.²⁰

In his seminal article, "Behind Every Thought Hides Another Thought," Israeli literary critic Dan Miron observed that the Yehoshua corpus can be characterized as a "poetics of wit." *Mr. Mani*, Miron suggested, exposes how narrative can be thought of as an intellectual game because of its artificial, constructed nature. Miron claimed that Yehoshua made intentional "mistakes" in his narrative: "battles will occur a year before or after they took place, locations will move a bit, people will know things they could not have known . . .".²¹ He believed that the reader is invited to uncover these mistakes by Yehoshua as a kind of game. The "game," in many cases, directs the reader to the salient "what if" conversation that Yehoshua is emphasizing.

Above all, Yehoshua describes *Mr. Mani* as "a conversation novel." Indeed, this chronicle of the Mani family from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-1980s comprises five conversations, documenting five

speakers. Only the last speaker is a Mani; the others relate the fate of the Manis they have known. These conversations are unique, also, in that most of the speakers occupy positions of power during the periods in which the conversations take place. An otherwise absent editor supplies each conversation's prologue and epilogue in a neutral, authoritative tone. Yehoshua succeeds in forcing the reader into a double take—as an outsider and an insider, both a detached observer and an involved confessor.²²

In each conversation, a new speaker describes his or her encounter with a different member of the Mani family. The responses of the speaker's conversational partner are omitted, but his or her identity is known to the reader and clearly influences how the speaker communicates.

The novel begins in the present and moves back in time, reenacting the life of six generations of the putatively typical Sephardic family, the Manis. The shadow of Freud looms large over *Mr. Mani*, where Yehoshua—who has been married to a psychoanalyst for half a century—invites readers on an archeological approach, that is, to dig into the text in order to recover underlying connections and decode recurring symbols.²³ Yehoshua's historical intersections are obvious, recognized episodes in the construction of the Zionist narrative: the rise of nationalism in Europe (1848), the Zionist Congresses (1899), the Belfour Declaration (1918), the Holocaust (1944), and the Lebanon War (1982).²⁴ Yehoshua touches on these historical intersections by way of this family, which is the subject of each conversation. These conversations continue, by allusion, all the way back to the mythic origins of the Jewish people in the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Over all, the conversations retrace the emergence of modern nationalism, in particular Zionism, and its effect on the Middle East and the Jerusalem Sephardim. Significant in its absence is the most crucial date in the rise of modern Jewish nationalism: 1948, the establishment of Israel as a sovereign state, the epochal date without which one cannot conceive of the modern Jewish world—or the world of this novel.

The speakers in the conversations describe the Manis as outsiders who produced idiosyncratic individuals in extreme reaction to their surroundings. The first and last conversations feature speakers who have decided to revive the dying Sephardic Mani clan: Hagar Shiloh in the 1980s and Avraham Mani in 1848, both of whom resolve not to let the future generations die out. The three middle speakers have brief encounters with a Mani: a German soldier in Crete in 1944, a Jewish British lieu-

tenant in Palestine/Eretz Israel in 1918, and a Jewish physician in western Galicia (Poland) in 1899.

In this novel, Yehoshua “regresses” to a mode of narration that can, in part, be seen as traditional. Not only is there conversation in which the voice of the interlocutor is not heard; there is a further “regression” to the romantic depiction of the Arab as typically found in the writing of the pre-statehood generation. In a way, the novel—dedicated to the author’s father—is a return not only to the era depicted but to the older literary approaches as well, i.e., to the hitherto unacknowledged Sephardic literary forefathers. Yehoshua employs a double framework here: on one hand, there is his faithfulness, through speech, to the periods he depicts, and on the other, there is the hindsight of the 1980s. In the process, Yehoshua reclaims his lost literary Sephardic “parentage,” and, therefore he sees the Arab cry for nationalism in a far different light.²⁵

Kibbutz Mash’abei Sadeh, 1982

The first and most contemporary section of *Mr. Mani* takes place in the midst of the war Israel was conducting in Lebanon in 1982. The speaker, Hagar Shiloh, is talking to her mother at Kibbutz Mash’abei Sadeh, of which they are members. Hagar, whose lover is Efi (Ephraim) Mani, believes she is pregnant and is trying to tell her mother about her visit to Efi’s father, Gavriel Mani, in Jerusalem. She saves Efi’s father Gavriel, a respected judge, from suicide. Hagar’s pregnancy turns out to be illusory, but she later becomes pregnant and gives birth to Roni Mani. Efi refuses to marry her, and she decides to raise the baby alone. In her conversation with her mother, Hagar feels that she is in a play whose implacable script has already been written: the end of the dynasty. Against all odds, therefore, she decides to change the text; she is not alone but is part of a long story in the hands of someone else. As an Ashkenazic woman, she is doing something audacious in trying to enter the Sephardic clan and invigorate its tired blood. She seeks her place in a family that is not a family but “a version of a family.”²⁶

Hagar’s brief sojourn in Arab East Jerusalem is one of the most delicately suggestive episodes in *Mr. Mani*. She concludes that this is a place in which she is an outsider while it is a place to which the Arabs she encounters naturally belong. She feels the distinct and separate Arab space

most strongly as she rides the hospital van after her short stay in an Arab hospital where she thought she had miscarried:

I began traveling through Jerusalem from the opposite direction that evening, together with the hospital workers who had finished their shift. And it was the most wondrous journey, Mom. To places where you have never been, through neighborhoods and little villages that are right inside the city itself, dripping at times through barren ravines, still spotted with snow, and bumping into dark streets, full of potholes and big puddles, that would suddenly turn into bustling commercial centers alive with colors and people, young and old, walking along with their donkeys, or shopping bags. And everyone actually seemed very pleasant and very relaxed, as if they really felt good being alone together and may have even become accustomed to it.²⁷

Hagar's account of her experiences in the Arab sector of Jerusalem supports the Sephardic narrative that views the division of the Land of Israel into two States would be as healthy for the integrity of the Palestinian identity as it would for the transformation of the Israeli sense of self.²⁸

Heraklion, Crete, 1944

In German-occupied Crete, a young German paratrooper, Egon Bruner, explains relates to his mother his experiences in Crete with the Mani family, which he was hunting down. During an interrogation, Efrayim Mani tries to convince Egon that he is no longer a Jew because he has willingly canceled his Jewishness and has become, simply, a person. Having been brought up without a mother and by an adoptive father and perhaps aware that his real father was not a Jew, Efrayim believed he could escape his historical identity and destiny.²⁹

Egon experiences the human toll that occupation inflicts not only on the occupied but on the occupier as well. Upon encountering members of the Mani family, Egon experiences his first taste of what he later come to call:

. . . that sweet and sour dish called Conqueror's Fear from which we eat until it makes us sick. This is the cause of the anxiety and the dread that emanate from each one of us, even when he is walking along innocently, absorbed in the loftiest and most humane thoughts. This is the reason for

the careful attention that each of our soldiers gives to every move he makes, even when he begins to loathe himself.³⁰

In this chapter, Yehoshua suggests that the dangers of Israeli militancy and its occupation of Arab lands is fraught with the dangers experienced by Egon in Crete. The “what if” scenario is a return to the amity of the Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem before 1948.

Jerusalem, Palestine, 1918

Ivor Stephen Horowitz, a young Jewish lawyer serving in the British Army in Jerusalem, which has recently been occupied by the British army, explains to his superior the case of the political agitator, Yosef Mani, who is being tried for treason and is eventually sentenced by a military court to banishment on the island of Crete.

Yosef grew up among the polyglot of Christian, Jewish, and Arab groups that made up Jerusalem during the first decade of the century. Yosef advocates the idea of bi-nationalism—two people on one land—and concentrates on political pursuits. He is preoccupied with the questions of national identity and engages in “practical education,” attending meetings of Shiites, Druze, Christian Communists, Maronites, Catholics, and all kinds of clerical assemblies, moving from identity to identity. He also maintains his connections with the Sephardic Jewish community and makes the acquaintance of many young eastern European Jews headed for Palestine.

Having made himself an indispensable translator in the British advancing army, Yosef offers his services as a spy to the Turks in exchange for the opportunity to address gatherings of Arab villagers throughout the countryside. His message to his sleepy and uncomprehending listeners is that in the wake of the Balfour Declaration, Palestine will be divided up among those wise enough to grasp the opportunity and that the Arabs will lose out unless they awaken to the meaning of the hour. Night after night, he stands before groups of sullen Arab villages who have been forcibly assembled by the Turks to warn them of the coming perils and advise them of the steps they must take to avert this:

And this is what he would say to them: “Who are you? Wake up before it is too late and the world is completely changed. Get yourself an identity fast!” And he takes out his Arabic translation of Lord Balfour’s declaration and

reads it to them without explanation. Then he continues, “This land is yours and it is ours, half for you and half for us.” And he points toward Jerusalem, and says, “The British are over there and the Turks are over here, but they will all leave, and we will be left alone. So stop sleeping and wake up.”³¹

Yosef wants the Arabs to awaken to the fact that the Balfour Declaration’s promise of a Jewish national home will mean a massive influx of Jewish immigrants, which will drastically alter the demographic balance and put the Palestinian Arabs at a distinct disadvantage. He wants them to understand that, as a result of these new circumstances, the Jews have become “like a swarm of locusts that is now hiding in the desert but will soon swoop down.”³² He also offers them a preemptive solution. Toward the end of each speech, Yosef displays a handmade map of Palestine and reiterates,

“Get yourself an identity. All over the world nations are taking on identities. If you delay, it will be too late. If you delay, there will be a disaster. Because we are coming.” And he takes out a pair of scissors and says, “Half for us and half for you.” Then he cuts the map from top to bottom, giving them half with the mountains and the Jordan River and keeping the coast and the sea for himself.”³³

When they seem disappointed by not getting the sea, he takes out another map and cuts it in half another way.

Here, Yehoshua goes back to the crossroads of the Balfour Declaration, where Britain’s call for the establishment of the State of Israel, instead of advocating a two-state solution, would have dramatically changed the history of Israel and Palestine.

Jelleny-Szad, 1899

A young doctor, Efrayim Shapiro, reports to his father his experiences at the Third Zionist Congress and his subsequent trips to Jerusalem with his sister, Linka, who has had an affair with a Dr. Moshe Mani, an obstetrician. This dialog takes place in Jelleny-Szad in southern Poland (near Oswiecim) in 1899.

Moshe Mani ran a lying-in clinic in Jerusalem using modern obstetrics, and women from all the nationalities in Jerusalem came to give birth under these enlightened conditions. The clinic is described as “multieth-

nic, syncretistic, and ecumenical.”³⁴ Dr. Mani appears as a polyglot microcosm mingling women of all nationalities, a confusion of boundaries of all sorts.³⁵

Fascinated by the figure of Herzl and his vision of a Zionist state, the doctor travels to Basel for the Zionist Congress of 1899 and there meets Efrayim and Linka from Galicia who return with him to Jerusalem. The doctor has fallen in love with Linka and accompanies the Shapiros on their return to Galicia. Dr. Mani tells the two visitors that one day, with the progress of technology, there will be a train running from Jerusalem to Oswiecim, the Polish town with the name Auschwitz (which is the neighboring town to the Shapiros’ estate in Jelleny-Szad).

Here, of course, Yehoshua is imaging a counter-history where Jews in the Diaspora emigrated to Israel and were saved from the ovens of the Nazis.

Athens, 1848

In Athens, Avraham Mani reports to his elderly mentor, Rabbi Shabbetai Hananiaha-Haddaya, the intricate tale of his trip to Jerusalem and the death of his son. Avraham, the rigidly conservative patriarch, and Yosef, his iconoclastic son, differ in their views of religion and territory.³⁶ Avraham’s dedication to a universal Jewish faith conflicts with the aspirations of Yosef to a mode of national existence that is essentially territorial. Yosef disavows traditional notions of Jewish peoplehood and dedicates himself to transforming his nation by uniting its people around the territory they inhabit. He wishes to fuse all the inhabitants of the land into a single national body that is founded on a native belonging to this land.³⁷

Yosef Mani was the first member of his family to settle in Jerusalem, an act of cardinal importance in a novel that attempts to formulate—or reformulate—the historical background of the Zionist state. Young Yosef traveled to Jerusalem from Istanbul in 1846 not out of any sense of religious yearning or nationalism but simply to marry Tamara, to whom he had been betrothed the year before. This chapter describes a world of Sephardic families residing in the major cities of the Eastern Mediterranean and living out their lives mostly unaffected by the dynamic political winds sweeping Europe. Yosef, for instance, was born in Salonika, spent his youth at the home of his teacher in Istanbul, and is

betrothed in Beirut to Tamara Valerio from Jerusalem. He is familiar with the streets of Istanbul and Jerusalem; he speaks Ladino, Turkish, French, English, and Arabic; in Jerusalem, he works as a courier and guide for the British consulate. He is impressed by the similarity between the Arabs and the Jews and develops a theory, his *idée fixe*, that the Arab inhabitants of Palestine (whom he calls *Ishmaelites*) are the unknowing descendants of the original Hebrews and really are “Jews who still don’t know they are Jews.”³⁸ Avraham, the father, also has an *idée fixe*, which demands that the unity of religion and nationality be maintained and the continuity of the family dynasty be perpetuated.

However, there is a dark side to this seemingly comfortable cosmopolitanism: Yosef is a homosexual, a voyeur, and will not have sex with his wife; therefore, he will not father children. Yosef is killed, apparently by one of his Arab lovers (possibly with assistance from Avraham³⁹), in order to preserve the continuity of national and religious unity both within his family and within the larger Jewish community.⁴⁰ Avraham, who had come to Jerusalem from Salonika to look into the doings of the young couple, sleeps with his very young daughter-in-law and she bears his child, Moshe.

In this culminating fifth section, Yehoshua addresses his concern with the relationship of the Jewish people to the land of Israel and to the Arabs who inhabit it. In the novel, the first Yosef reflects Yehoshua’s wish for the Sephardim’s early nineteenth-century experience of living peacefully, side by side with the Arabs.

Arab Relations

One of the most interesting issues in *Mr. Mani* is the Jews’ relationship with the Arab. In Yehoshua’s earlier fiction, the Arab maintains a central but separate existence. In contrast, in *Mr. Mani* it seems as if the Arab has entered into the psyche of the Israeli and the self-definition of the Israeli is intimately bound up with that of the Arab. This is in stark contrast to the position of the Arab in earlier Hebrew literature where the depiction of the Arab was so romanticized, so kept at a distance, that there could be no talk of the Arab’s taking a place “within” the Israeli psyche.

Mr. Mani’s image of the Arab may well be traceable to the emergence of Yehoshua’s Sephardic roots in his writings and to his increasing homage to Sephardic as well as to Ashkenazic writers and thinkers of the pre-state-

hood days. For example, as noted above, he portrays Yosef of the 1848 Mani family as believing that Arabs are in essence ancient Jews who ought to be brought back into the fold. Presumably, the recovery of a common ancestor of Arab and Jews can serve to eliminate the animosity between them and liberate both sides from their cultural limitations.⁴¹

The Sephardic sense of familiarity with Arab culture is depicted in the epilogue and biographical data that conclude every conversation in the novel. Gavriel Mani decides to travel to the kibbutz in the Negev to see his grandson; he drives through Hebron, to the horror of Hagar and her mother, Yael. Over their apprehensions, he assures them that he feels entirely safe in going from Jerusalem to Beersheba through Hebron and that the villagers are peaceful. It is the fall of 1987, and when a stone is thrown at his car, he confesses that to take this road is now inadvisable, although it still tempts him.

Mr. Mani's narrative seeks to discern, critique, and ultimately, transform the manner in which traditional notions of Jewish territorial affinity affect Israeli perceptions of the national and territorial prerogatives of the Arabs who inhabit the Land of Israel.⁴²

The Arab-Israeli Conflicts

Mr. Mani opens with a signature paragraph introducing Hagar Shiloh and the brute fact that time in Israel is measured by the dates of wars.⁴³

Born in 1962 in Mash'abei Sadeh, a kibbutz thirty kilometers south of Beersheba that was founded in 1949. Her parents, Roni and Yael Shiloh, first arrived there in 1956 in the course of the army service. Hagar's father Roni was killed on the last day of the Six Day War as a reservist on the Golan Heights. As Hagar was five at the time, her claim to have clear memories of her father may be correct.⁴⁴

The Arab-Israeli conflict and its many wars might have been solved long ago had the leadership of the Zionist movement been entrusted to the indigenous Sephardim of Eretz Yisrael who understood Arab sensibilities better than did the Ashkenazim.⁴⁵ An essay by Elie Eliachar, a former Deputy Mayor of Jerusalem and a member of one of Israel's oldest Oriental Jewish families, makes the same argument: "Had the Zionist leaders in those days been wise enough to accept the guidance of these [Sephardic]

and other individuals who had experience with Arabs, a better understanding between Jews and Arabs might have been brought about without any harm done to our national movement.”⁴⁶

Eliachar pointed to item after item that antagonized the Arabs to the point of armed conflict: land purchases that did not take the Arab tenants into consideration, Hebrew language instruction in schools that excluded the Arabs, repeated personal insults of Arab dignitaries, incursions into their lands. He wrote in 1975 that his position of 1936 presented to the Royal Commission still held and things would have been different had the Sephardic point of view conditioned the relationship with the Arabs.⁴⁷

We are Jews of Semitic-Oriental origin despite the extensive sojourn of a considerable number of people from the West. The Land of Israel lies in the Orient and our first duty on returning is to regain the Oriental characteristics which we lost in the West, without in any way relinquishing all the positive traits we acquired there. Jews and Arabs are Semites and hence related. The Hebrew and Arabic languages stem from a common source, as do our religious beliefs: even many of our basic characteristics are alike.⁴⁸

Eliachar's views on the Sephardim are generally consistent with Yehoshua's notion that a Sephardic version of Zionism would have created a different landscape where two peoples would be living side by side in peace.

Sephardic Themes

Sephardic responses to the Ashkenazic culture and hegemony challenge the “Zionist master narrative” created by the Ashkenazic literary establishment.⁴⁹ Sephardic Zionism as an ideology, with its pluralistic foundation and tolerance toward the Arabs, was displaced by the Ashkenazic power structure, which was European in origin, and whose notions of Jewish nationalism were thus founded along the lines of nineteenth-century European nationalist models. Sephardic Zionism, only remotely influenced by these new ideas, is implied in *Mr. Mani*. The Sephardic Manis respect Arab nationalism and have an intimacy with the Arab communities of the Mediterranean. As a consequence, the Sephardic Jew is more at home in the Middle East than the Ashkenazi and, perhaps, more capable of living at peace with the Arab inhabitants of the area.

Several scholars, writing about *Mr. Mani*, failed to connect the Sephardic critique of Ashkenazic Zionist ideology to Yehoshua's interrogation of the entire history of the Jewish people in *Mr. Mani*. For example, Gilead Moragh finds the notion puzzling that *Mr. Mani* is preoccupied with questions of Sephardic identity and that it provides a counter-narrative to prevailing versions of Zionism discourse by engaging Jewish history from a Sephardic point of view. Moragh argues that with one significant exception, the fifth conversation, Sephardic characters have little voice and no independent existence in *Mr. Mani*.

The little there is in their speech is reported speech, and their inner worlds are reconstructed or invented by others who are often profoundly alien to them. The narrative perspective in the first four conversations belongs to a sequence of explicitly non-Sephardic narrators who are appropriating the Mani story to serve their own needs. It is not surprising that in these narratives, the Manis do not come to embody much that is typical or representative of the Sephardic community and its culture. This also explains the paucity of knowledge about what most of the Mani men actually think or feel.⁵⁰

Yael Feldman agrees with Moragh: "The Manis are far from being a representative Sephardic family and it is impossible to maintain that the Mani perspective constitutes a hidden Sephardic critique of European Zionist ideology."⁵¹ However, I disagree with Moragh and Feldman on this matter and find the writings of Yaron Peleg and Alan L. Mintz to be much more in line with my thinking concerning the Sephardic counter-narrative.

In Peleg's view, for example, *Mr. Mani* examines the Sephardic element in pre-Zionist Palestine from an Ashkenazic point of view, which looks at the Palestinian Sephardim with a mixture of admiration, bewilderment, and anxiety. The Ashkenazim sense the almost mythic ability of the Sephardim to survive in an ever-changing world, an ability that is sustained by their native attachment to the land and their natural relations with the Arabs. The novel pays homage to the deep affinity of the Sephardim to Eretz Israel, irrespective of politics. The characters in *Mr. Mani* are a natural part of the Mediterranean world. They know it intimately and move through it freely. For them, Zionism is just another regional political phase that does not determine their relation to the Land of Israel. The Ashkenazic point of view calls attention to the nature of Zionism as an artificial and perhaps even a harmful development in Jewish

history. The natural attachment of the Sephardim to the Mediterranean Muslim world questions not only the validity of Zionism but its overall benefit to the Jews. The novel seems to say that, unlike their Ashkenazic brethren, the Sephardim never really had a Jewish problem.⁵²

In “Constructing and Deconstructing the Mystique of Sephardim in Yehoshua’s *Mr. Mani* and *Journey to the End of the Millennium*,” Mintz notes the manner in which *Mr. Mani* peels away the layers of historical inevitability and rolls back the triumph of Western ideology as it moves one step closer to a time when nations and national identities were finally consolidated. *Mr. Mani* provocatively and perversely follows this line not into the recesses of the Ashkenazic Diaspora where Zionism was derived but into the world of Sephardic Jewry, which historically composed the largest segment of continuous Jewish settlement in Jerusalem, though it is a smaller percentage of world Jewry. Jerusalem is presented before Zionism and places within it an hypostatized Sephardic community whose growing entanglement with Western Zionism can be traced through resistance and capitulation.⁵³

Mr. Mani makes claims for a superior worldliness of the Sephardim, a quality that enabled them to see alternatives to the ideology-driven march of Western history. Jews of the Ottoman Empire lived in closer and less conflicting contact with Muslim peoples than with the members of the other principal minority, the Christians. Their mercantile travels gave them an international perspective and a sensitivity to the relations among national groups.

In contrast to the Judaism of their East European coreligionists, the religious convictions of the Sephardim were deeply but less fanatically held and were less insulated from the world. When religious faith collapsed for a segment of Russian Jewry at the end of the nineteenth century, political Zionism was seized upon as a substitute for failed messianic beliefs and turned into an ideological movement. The Sephardim chose a path of accommodation instead. Rather than rejecting religion and adopting secular replacements for it, they made room for elements of modernity alongside their family-centered piety. Zionism came to them naturally, not as a radical redefinition of the Jewish people but as an extension of a primordial attachment to both an ideal geography and a real place.⁵⁴

The Dysfunctional Mani Family

The Manis as a family and as individuals are ineffectual and obsessed in ways that undercut the legitimacy of their visionary policies and it all starts with the first Yosef Mani. In fact, as mentioned above, Yosef believed that the Arabs are Jews who have forgotten their Jewishness. According to the account given by his father, an unreliable but insightful narrator, Yosef's ideas are the ultimate result of the boy having been seduced by the young wife of his elderly rabbi and teacher, which in turn leads to his homosexuality and his death. The father calls the son's notions an *idée fixe*, and he journeys from Salonika to try to ensure that the marriage "bears seed and not just *idées fixes*." His failure to do so and his guilt over impregnating his daughter-in-law lead him later in life to contemplate suicide. And so the urge to suicide, obscurely enacted by Judge Mani more than a century later, is imprinted in the genetic code of the Manis.⁵⁵ *Mr. Mani* is about obsessions that are self-destructive in that the heroes in the novel are directed by an antique self-destruction, with murder and incest lying in their unconscious.⁵⁶

Because the Mani family's notions come to naught, their decision to pursue their ideas at the expense of the preservation of their species is doubly self-defeating. For faced with the choice to sow their seed or to sow their ideas, they constantly do the latter. In contrast to received notions of potent oriental patriarchs propagating vast clans, the Manis have to be tricked into reproducing. From the father who sleeps with his daughter-in-law at one end of the novel to the kibbutz student who gets Judge Mani an illegitimate grandson at the other, this is a family whose dynastic line hangs by a very tattered thread. The Manis prefer to remain bachelors, are barely attracted to the female sex, and would rather not fulfill the commandment to be fruitful and multiply. Each of them has but one descendent, who only with difficulty secures the continuation of the line. The either/or choice between sexuality and political consciousness is vividly expressed in the case of Yosef Mani, the treacherous translator and *homo politicus* of the third conversation.⁵⁷

All the characters in *Mr. Mani* are self-deceiving individuals, and in compensation, they "fashion group-identifications (Sephardim, Zionism, Pacifism, Universalism, Nazism, Religion,) which they delude themselves into believing will solve all their problems."⁵⁸ Moreover, the Manis suffer

from an assortment of psychological problems, ranging from passivity to aggression, from incest to filicide, and from frigidity and repressed homosexuality to suicidal urges. Undoubtedly, this is a portrait of a family far removed from the classic ethnic stereotype of the Sephardic family.

Why, then, would Yehoshua undermine his own creation? I believe that Yehoshua turns, symbolically, to the biblical tales of the patriarchs and matriarchs because they, like the Manis, are hardly paragons of virtue. There is the story of Tamar, who sleeps with her father-in-law Judah in order to produce an heir to her husband, the transfer of the burden of infertility from the matriarch of Genesis to the Mani patriarchs; Abraham and Joseph and the *aqedah* episode; and Ishmael, the banished son of Abraham and Hagar.⁵⁹

The fifth conversation gives us the only speaker who is a Mani. In one of many reversals, Avraham Mani comes to his teacher, Rabbi Shabbetai Hananiaha-Haddaya, as the rabbi is dying to give confession and extract vengeance.

Yehoshua sees the Manis as reflecting many of the problems of family relations and, especially, the father-son dynamic. "Family relations," wrote Yehoshua in an essay published in 1998, ". . . are, in my view, one of the areas of life that are richest in moral dilemmas and choices. Here . . . a person's morality is tested. Especially because connections of love and mutual dependence are so characteristic of family relations, the moral equations become subtle, complex, and often painful."⁶⁰ Interestingly, Yehoshua's wife, a psychoanalyst, has remarked that all his fiction is at heart about the friction between father and son.⁶¹

Most of the members of the house of Mani are indeed "mani-acs" who represent the Mani dynasty over a period of 150 years. Yehoshua's depiction of them represents his views on the biblical narrative, family relations, and father-son dynamic. In effect, Yehoshua is saying that there is a little "Mani" in all of us, some to a lesser or greater degree.

Conclusion

Mr. Mani is replete with references to the "what ifs" of the Sephardic Zionist counter-narrative. The Sephardic point of view, reflected in this fictional chronicle, points to the close proximity and amity between Arabs and Jews. The Sephardic community is a community of moderation.

Hence, there are opportunities for accommodation with the Arabs and Christian Europeans that are invisible to the Ashkenazic coreligionists.⁶²

Mr. Mani is not a nostalgic evocation of the Sephardic past or an embittered tirade against Ashkenazic humiliation of Sephardic or Oriental Jews, the two convenient subgenres of Hebrew fiction situated in non-Ashkenazi milieus. Rather, it is an agonized fictionalization of the problems of Israeli existence in the time of its composition, after the Lebanon War, and at the beginning of the *Intifada*. Actual political events of the 1980s are referred to only in the first of the five sections of the novel, and then only as background to the story, which takes place in Jerusalem. However, like many Israeli novels, it is motivated by a well-grounded conviction that something has gone awry in the realization of the Zionist dream. Yehoshua attempts to work out here the search for what went wrong. The innocent assumption is that if you can identify the wrong turn, you can return to it and make the right turn.⁶³

Neither sparing nor idealizing the Sephardim, Yehoshua posits an alternative narrative in which Sephardim participate in the traditional Zionist story and create their own version. The Mani (read: Sephardic) attachment to the land of Israel is not political, ideological, or interchangeable; rather it is organic. The Manis are the link to the land and also the bridge to the Arabs, the true indigenous people.⁶⁴ By placing Dr. Mani with Herzl at the Zionist Congress meeting in 1899, Yehoshua effectively includes the Sephardim in the European enterprise. European Zionism is embodied by the figure of Herzl, shown to be weak and ailing, on the verge of total collapse. By contrast, the Sephardic counterpart, Dr. Mani, is robust.

In *Mr. Mani*, Yehoshua suggests a different Zionism conceived by Sephardic Jews as an alternative to the Zionism developed by the Ashkenazic Jews, which, in his estimation, prevents Israel from resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict. Through the Mani family lineage, the novel points to a Sephardic Jewish solution. In contrast to Ashkenazic Zionism, which ignored the national aspirations of the Arabs when conceiving the establishment of the Jewish state, each generation of the Mani family in Yehoshua's novel attempts to establish the Jewish hold on the Land of Israel by means of a compromise with the Arabs.⁶⁵ In this hypothetical scenario, the nation-state is undermined as the major achievement of the Zionist movement. With all the attention paid to dates, the absence of 1948 is an omission fraught with significance. European Zionism is weak and fails.

The Sephardic counter-narrative is further exemplified in the novel by the initiatives of the Manis in response to the events depicted in 1918 and 1899. Though there are many differences between England in 1918 and Poland in 1899, the central message is similar. If the Mani of either conversation, father Moshe of the fourth conversation or son Joseph of the third, had succeeded in his rhetorical endeavors, the era of the Shoah would have found a different Jewish people in Europe. If Moshe Mani had persuaded Efrayim Shapiro to stay in Jerusalem, there would have been no Shapiros in Poland to transport to Auschwitz. If Joseph Mani had persuaded the Arabs to take on the national political identity in 1918 or, more subtly, if he had persuaded Ivor Horowitz immediately that he was an English Jew and not a Jewish Englishman, perhaps he, and not his grandson, would have been the first family to settle in Israel, in the 1920s, not the 1960s or 1970s, and perhaps a state of Israel would have come into being earlier, particularly considering Great Britain's political role in the matter. What is unquestionable, however, is that if many Polish Jews of Shapiro's social position and generation had emigrated to Israel in 1899 or if many English Jews of Horowitz's social position and generation had done so in the 1920s, the Nazis would have encountered a different Jewish reality in Europe and the Middle East in the 1930s.⁶⁶ The Holocaust represents both the consequence of these earlier choices and a road that saw Jewishness as an identity purely of the mind.

At crucial junctures of modern history, such as the Balfour Declaration, the Manis, because of who they are and where they come from, are able to glimpse options invisible to the Ashkenazic Zionist movement. They contemplate an alternative path that does not foreclose possibilities, one that negates the unremitting tension with its neighbors.⁶⁷ The Yosef of section five has the ideological conviction and alternative existential vision. Yosef has come to believe that it is imperative to obliterate the ethnic and religious distinctions that divide the inhabitants of Jerusalem and cause constant conflict among them. Furthermore, Yosef constantly seeks "to forge relationships among strangers and to fight against what he considers isolation or self-segregation."⁶⁸ He does this out of his conviction that "when all will recognize their true but hidden nature, they will make peace with each other."⁶⁹ The first Yosef Mani's attitude is rooted in the ideological stance of Canaanite thinkers such as Ben-Gurion and Ben-Zvi, who regarded Palestinian Arabs as "converted

descendents of Jews” who had remained devoted to the land after the destruction of the Second Temple. While according to Canaanites, the Arabs of Palestine privileged their loyalty to the land, the Jews chose to be loyal to their faith, losing contact with the native soil.⁷⁰

In many important ways, the second section of *Mr. Mani* in German-occupied Crete is an extended exploration of the consequences of Israel’s present-day transformation into a nation of conquerors with an evolving culture of occupation. Egon’s initial aspiration for national transformation coincides closely with the fundamentals of the Zionist dream. Both are idealistic visions of a national renewal that requires casting off the heritage of a despised past and drawing on tropes of an ancient Mediterranean culture to evoke the redemption that will occur upon the nation’s return to the mythic land of origin.⁷¹

When Yehoshua is writing about the occupation of Crete, he is thinking about Israelis in the territories that they occupy. For example, the second section of *Mr. Mani* is an extended exploration of the consequences of Israel’s deliberate choice to transform itself into a nation of conquerors with an evolving culture of occupation. Hence, we can begin to discern the way in which the contemporary collective choice is as monumental as those reflected in *Mr. Mani*. That is, if the Jewish people persist along the road of occupation and create no peace settlement, what new Shoah lies twenty years in the future, a future that includes the real possibility that nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons of mass destruction could fall into the hands of terrorists or be used by terrorist states? While one can look with dismay at the choices not taken by European Jews 60 years ago, one must contemplate the picture of grandchildren 60 years from now looking back with comparable dismay at the choices not taken now.⁷²

NOTES

1. Marc D. Angel, “A Sephardic Approach to *Halakhah*,” *Midstream Magazine* (August/September, 1975). Biblical scholars have often complained that the word *hesed* in the Hebrew Bible is difficult to translate into English, because it has no precise equivalent in our language; it is often translated as “loving-kindness,” “mercy,” “steadfast love,” and sometimes “loyalty.”
2. Yael S. Feldman, *Glory and Agony* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2010): 22.

3. Paul Mendes-Fleur and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Jew in the Modern World* (NY, Oxford University Press, 2011): 620.
4. See Gilead Morahg, "Borderline Cases: National Identity and Territorial Affinity in A. B. Yehoshua's *Mr. Mani*," *AJS Review*, 30:1 (2006): 168.
5. See Arnold J. Band, "Mar Mani: The Archeology of Self-Deception," *Prooftexts* 12 (1992): 239; Alan L. Mintz, *The Boom in Contemporary Israeli Fiction* (Waltham, MA, Brandeis University Press, 1992): 133; and Mintz, "Counterlives," *The New Republic* (June 29, 1992): 442.
6. Doreet Hopp, "Avraham B. Yehoshua," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Band, "Mar Mani," 234.
9. Abraham B. Yehoshua, "Beyond Folklore: The Identity of the Sephardic Jew," *Quaderns de la Mediterrania* 14 (2010), 152.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*, 153.
12. *Ibid.*, 154–155.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Gila Ramras-Rauch, "A. B. Yehoshua and the Sephardic Experience," *World Literature Today*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (Winter 1991): 12.
15. Horn, *Facing*, 78–79.
16. *Ibid.*, 79.
17. Alan L. Mintz, "Constructing and Deconstructing Mystique of Sephardim in Yehoshua's *Mr. Mani* and *Journey to the End of the Millenium*," ed. Alan L. Mintz, *Translating Israel* (Syracuse, NY, Syracuse University Press, 2001): 173–174.
18. Horn, *Facing*, 13.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, 14.
21. Dan Miron, "Behind Every Thought Hides Another Thought: Meditations on *Mr. Mani*," *Siman Kriyah* 21 (December 1990): 153–157.
22. See Mintz, "Constructing," 184; Ramras-Rauch, "A. B. Yehoshua," 10–11; and Yael S. Feldman, "Identity and Counter-Identity: The Sephardi Heritage in Israel," *Midstreams*, 43, 4 (1997): 19.
23. Maurizio Ascari, *Literature of the Golden Age* (Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 2011): 64.
24. Band, "Mar Mani," 238.
25. Ramras-Rauch, "A. B. Yehoshua," 12.
26. Ramras-Rauch, "A. B. Yehoshua," 11.
27. A. B. Yehoshua, *Mr. Mani* (New York, Doubleday, 1992), 63.
28. Morahg, "Borderline," 180.
29. Band, "Mar Mani," 241.
30. Yehoshua, *Mr. Mani*, 105.
31. *Ibid.*, 189.
32. Yehoshua, *Mr. Mani*, 190.
33. *Ibid.*

34. Mintz, "Constructing," 179.
35. Hoffman, "The Womb," 255.
36. Morahg, "Borderline," 174.
37. *Ibid.*, 175.
38. Band, "Mar Mani," 239.
39. The agency of the first Yosef's death is by no means unambiguous. Yehoshua has noted in both written and oral communication that the father, Avraham, actually killed his own son. Band, "Mar Mani," 244, ff 11.
40. Gilead Morahg, "The Heritage of the Aqedah in A. B. Yehoshua's *Mr. Mani*," eds. Misha'el M. Caspi and John T. Greene, *Unbinding the Binding of Isaac* (NY, University Press of America, 2007):194–195.
41. Ramras-Rauch, "A. B. Yehoshua," 9.
42. Morahg, "Borderline," 167.
43. Arnold J. Band, "Sabbatian Echoes in A. B. Yehoshua's *Mar Mani*," eds. William M. Brinner, et al., *Judaism and Islam* (Leiden, the Netherlands, Brill, 2000): 343.
44. Yehoshua, *Mr. Mani*, 5.
45. Band, "Sabbatian," 345.
46. Marzell Dag and Peretz Kidron, *Living with Jews* (London, UK, Weidenfield and Nicholas, 1983): 166–167.
47. Band, "Sabbatian," 345.
48. Dag, *Living*, 207.
49. Horn, *Facing*, 172.
50. Morahg, "Borderline," 173.
51. Yael Feldman, "Behazarah leber' eshit," in Ben-Dov, *Bakivun hanegedi [In the Opposite Direction]*, 208, 209.
52. Yoran Peleg, *Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2005): 138.
53. Mintz, "Constructing," 179.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Ibid.*, 181.
56. Horn, *Facing*, 6.
57. Mintz, "Constructing," 182.
58. Horn, *Facing*, 172.
59. Feldman, *Glory*, 285–302.
60. A. B. Yehoshua, "Kohah hanora shel ashmah qetanah" [The terrible power of a minor guilt] (Tel Aviv, Israel, 1998): 65. Morahg, "Testing," 241.
61. Clive Sinclair, "Book Review: A State of Mind," *The Independent on Sunday*, March 7, 1993.
62. "Book Review: Translating Israel: Contemporary Hebrew Literature and Its Reception in America," *Shofar*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 2005): 121.
63. Band, "Deceptions," 235–236.
64. Mintz, *The Boom*, 131.
65. Yosef Oren, "Post-Zionism and Anti-Zionism in Israeli Literature," ed. Shlomo Sharan, *Israel and the Post-Zionists: A Nation at Risk* (Portland, OR,

- Sussex Academic Press, 2003): 195.
66. Horn, "The Shoah," 144–145.
67. Mintz, "Constucting," 181.
68. Morahg, "The Heritage," 192–193.
69. *Ibid.*
70. Ascari, *Literature*, 74.
71. Morahg, "Borderline," 170.
72. Horn, "The Shoah," 147.