



והלונים לו ולאילמו סביב

Sephardic Jews in America

— A DIASPORIC HISTORY —

Aviva Ben-Ur



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Introduction

The Jews Who Weren't There: Scholarly and Communal Exclusion

On a late summer day in 1910, twenty-one-year-old Albert J. Amateau, a Sephardic Jew from the Aegean town of Milas, arrived at Ellis Island.¹ His ship, the SS *Santa Maria*, had provided no cabin accommodations, obliging passengers to cross the frigid Atlantic on the open deck, lying on their own mattresses and consuming only the food they could bring with them. The passage dragged on for twenty days.² Similar hardships are conveyed in the diary of Alfred Ascher, a native of Izmir who left the Peloponnesian port of Patras for New York in November 1915. A ferocious nighttime storm during the one-month crossing thrust his ship back 350 miles. The sight of “men, women, children crying, screaming,” some praying fervently with phylacteries and prayer shawls, others with icons of the Virgin Mary, reduced the stalwart Ascher to tears.³

These adversities prepared neither Amateau nor Ascher for the difficulties that lay ahead on land. For unlike most Jewish immigrants, Eastern Sephardim were not readily recognized as Jews by their established Ashkenazic coreligionists and could therefore not expect automatically to receive the assistance extended to Jewish immigrants, the vast majority of whom were Yiddish-speaking and of Eastern European origin. Toward the end of an amazingly long and varied life, which stretched nearly 107 years, Amateau still vividly recalled several incidents in which Ashkenazim either denied or doubted his Jewishness. Some of these Ashkenazim were boarding-house proprietors who had turned Amateau away, forcing him to seek out a hostel run under Sephardic auspices.⁴ Alfred Ascher must have also experienced similar frustrations. His niece Gloria Ascher, who grew up in the Bronx in the 1950s, recently testified that for some Ashkenazim, “people who spoke something like Spanish

instead of Yiddish and ate grape leaves instead of gefilte fish were simply not Jews!”⁵

This denial of Jewishness was a defining experience for Eastern Sephardic immigrants (and, in some cases, for their native-born children and grandchildren as well). Perhaps not accidentally, in both the U.S. Jewish community and the academic study of its past, Jewishness has tacitly been assumed to be synonymous with Germanic or Eastern European descent.⁶ What began at the turn of the twentieth century as denial of shared ethnicity and religion (whereby Ashkenazim failed to recognize Sephardim as fellow Jews) continues today in textbooks, articles, documentaries, films, and popular awareness. More often than not, Sephardic Jews are simply absent from any sort of portrayal of the American Jewish community.

This exclusion is deeply embedded within historiographical paradigms. The overwhelming majority of scholarly works devoted to the American Jewish past and present communicate unawareness of non-Ashkenazic communities.⁷ Narratives stretching back to colonial times typically display a perfunctory mention of the pioneering Western Sephardim who arrived in 1654—the proverbial “first Jews on American soil”—and an equally mechanical reference to their rapid assimilation into majority cultures.⁸ Studies of American Jewry focusing on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reserve at best a one-sentence nod at Eastern Sephardim (Iberian-origin Jews transplanted to the Balkans and the Anatolian Peninsula) and Mizrahim (Jews indigenous to North Africa and the Middle East), who came to these shores from the disintegrating Ottoman Empire. The non-Ashkenazic Jew then plunges precipitously off the page into the abyss of historical oblivion.⁹

Significantly, works aiming to be temporally or thematically inclusive bear this trait of exclusion or marginalization no less than more specialized studies. Consider, for example, a diachronic history of American Jews (2003) and an award-winning history of American Judaism (2004), neither of which includes a single mention of Ladino-, Arabic-, or Greek-speaking Jewish immigrants.¹⁰ The author of the first work also produced a 350-page history of American Jews (2004) that devotes a lone paragraph to “Jews from the Balkans, Turkey, and Greece,” with no mention of the far more numerous Arabic- or Farsi-speaking Jews.¹¹ These examples from some of the leading American Jewish historians illustrate that an exclusionary narrative frames even the finest contemporary scholarship. These omissions do not reflect a failure to absorb

trends from the broader field of U.S. history. The assumption that Jews are either Germanic or Eastern European prevails in American immigration historiography as well.¹²

Communal leaders and scholars of various disciplines have long recognized the neglect of Sephardi, Mizrahi, and Romaniote Jews in portraits of the American Jewish experience.¹³ Pedagogues in both U.S. institutions of higher learning and Jewish religious schools have openly acknowledged this lacuna as a serious problem. Suggestions for integrating Sephardic studies into various curricula have appeared in dozens of articles and several volumes¹⁴ and have been voiced at numerous Jewish studies conferences.¹⁵

The struggle against invisibility has produced laudable results in both the scholarly and lay communities. The ethnic revivalism of the 1960s and 1970s, epitomized in the film version of *Fiddler on the Roof* and Alex Haley's *Roots* and influenced by the growing consciousness of the Holocaust's destructive impact,¹⁶ witnessed an efflorescence of higher learning and research about neglected Jewish minority groups. The founding of the Sephardic Studies Program at Yeshiva University in 1964 not only helped to develop the field intellectually but also spawned dozens of rabbis, teachers, cantors, and community leaders, trained to enrich popular awareness.¹⁷ Following quickly in Yeshiva University's footsteps was the establishment of the American Society of Sephardic Studies (1967) and its journal, the *Sephardic Scholar* (later incorporated as the journal of Yeshiva University's Sephardic Studies Program), the American Sephardi Federation (ASF, 1973), and Sephardic House (1978), now part of the ASF.¹⁸ Recently, Sephardic studies programming officially integrated into Jewish studies or Jewish history has developed at Brandeis University, Florida International University, Stanford University, the University of California at Los Angeles, and the University of Washington, to name the most prominent examples. These innovations and developments, alas, have done little to draw Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews out of public obscurity and still less to reshape the paradigm of American Jewish history.

If non-Ashkenazic Jews are generally not part of the recognized portrait of contemporary Jewry, or of American and U.S. Jewish history, one might wonder if this anonymity is deserved. Why focus on a segment of the American Jewish community that has probably never risen above 3 or 4 percent since colonial times?¹⁹ Sephardi and Mizrahi studies scholars and communal leaders have offered some suggestive responses to

this question. In the context of neglected Jewish belles-lettres, Norman Roth has observed, “we are missing a tremendous opportunity in field research.”²⁰ Author and activist David Shasha argues that Sephardic civilization, with its “religious humanism,” can speak to many of the crises that confront American Jews, including assimilation and cultural alienation.²¹ Joel Marcus, a member of the ASF board of directors, stresses that non-Ashkenazic Jews, to whom the Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements are not indigenous, can serve as leading examples of “religious pluralism,” “great tolerance and mutual respect.”²² Sociologist Abraham Lavender has argued that since Sephardic Jews constitute a separate group, they should be granted the same attention bestowed on other ethnic groups. He also points out that outside the United States, and particularly in the State of Israel, non-Ashkenazic Jews constitute a sizeable segment of the general Jewish population, and thus these Jews are “consequential to the future of Jewry.” Finally, Lavender affirms that Sephardic history offers rich lessons for “the relations between the dominant society and minority groups.”²³

It is tempting to contend that *despite* their small number, non-Ashkenazic Jews are indeed worthy of study or consideration. This book, however, argues for a focus on Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews precisely *because* they constitute the periphery of America’s Jewish community. The inspiration for this approach comes from the study of the margins as a tool for shedding light on broader society. In an examination of newly Orthodox Jewish women, sociologist Lynn Davidman has explored in detail a very small and unusual group as a way of understanding “more general social trends.” Though Orthodox Jews constitute only about 10 percent of the U.S. Jewish population, the adoption of that denomination by mostly young, Jewish women and their explanations for this radical choice may shed light on dilemmas of women from broader society whose concerns are seldom articulated.²⁴ Similarly, Jill Matthews has studied the case records of women living in mental institutions “as a way of uncovering the normative definitions of femininity in Australian culture.” By examining the women who “‘broke the rules’ of femininity,” Matthews was able to “tease out the underlying, implicit rules for what it means to be a woman.”²⁵ Sociologist Charles Selengut and poet-professor Bruce Kamenetz, in their interviews with Jews who have adopted Buddhism or joined a wide variety of so-called cults, both discovered that defection from the Jewish community reveals dissatisfaction with the various denominations of Judaism or with broader Anglo-American

society.²⁶ These observations suggest that the exception is well deserving of scrutiny, for it illuminates what is otherwise imperceptible in mainstream society. A focus on the Jewish community's ethnic margins may help recast understanding of the country's majority Ashkenazic community and, more generally, the broader theme of U.S. intraethnic relations.

The secondary, and related, concern of this book is the image of excluded Jews on those rare occasions when they do make an appearance on the U.S. stage. As M. Mitchell Serels observed in the 1980s, "The Sephardim have often been viewed as *exotica*, curiosities which have shot off from the mainstream of Jewry, shunted into an isolation from the flow of Jewish ideas, and fossilized into an unsophisticated backwardness. This inaccuracy has permeated the entirety of the body of Jewish history."²⁷ Author and religious leader David Rabeeya described as racist the "distortions" and "falsehoods" about Sephardic Jewry perpetuated in the field of American Jewish education.²⁸ Anthropologists Walter P. Zenner and Shlomo Deshen observe that in the United States scholars and laymen "concerned with matters of Jewry and Jewish culture" see non-Ashkenazic Jews as requiring "either justification or improvement, but they are not perceived for what they are, simply traditional manifestations of Jewry."²⁹ At the opposite extreme are depictions of Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim as "more Jewish" than Ashkenazim, either because of purported ancestral "purity" or closer geographical association with the Land of Israel. An assessment of recurring images at both ends of the spectrum is crucial to a paradigm shift in American Jewish historiography.³⁰

The phenomenon of scholarly and communal exclusion raises sensitive questions. Why are non-Ashkenazic Jews often overlooked in the broader field of Jewish studies and in the mainstream Jewish community's portrayal of itself both privately and to the outside world? The simplest explanation is that Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews are not situated at the geographic or ethnic centers of the contemporary Jewish world. The vast majority of Jews, both globally and in the United States, is of Ashkenazic descent, with roots in Western and Eastern Europe. Moreover, the traditional periodization of American Jewish history, which divides the past into the Sephardic, Germanic, Eastern European, and American phases, does not account for Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim.³¹ But in an age in which the study of minority groups is often privileged, one wonders what other factors might be involved. Academics and community members have offered various suggestions likely to generate

heated debate. In a broader Jewish history context, historians Marina Rustow and Sarah Abrevaya Stein have pointed to the force of Eurocentrism, “laziness,” and “a profound resistance to reconceptualize.”³² In an analysis of the neglect of Sephardi- and Mizrahi-authored fiction, Edouard Roditi suggests that “guilt-feelings about their own cultural assimilation or nostalgia for their own ancestral past” are what gravitate most American Jewish readers to Ashkenazi writers, such as Bernard Malamud, Chaim Potok, and Philip Roth.³³ Roditi seems to imply that American Jewish readers—who are largely of Eastern European Ashkenazic origin—are most interested in reading about their own cultural group. Rachel Wahba, a writer and therapist based in Los Angeles, trenchantly argues that the failure to conceptually incorporate Mizrahi Jews into the American Jewish community represents not “benign ignorance” but rather an “unconscious and deep-rooted need to identify as European, . . . wanting to identify with the West, not wanting to be seen as ‘other.’”³⁴ Whether or not one accepts these explanations, the ongoing exclusion of non-Ashkenazic Jews from American Jewish historiography and communal self-representation should be of great concern.

American Jewish History from the Margins

Sephardic Jews in America considers a “minority within a minority,” the 4 percent of the U.S. Jewish community that is not of Germanic or Eastern European Ashkenazic descent.³⁵ Though the diversity of this group defies easy categorization, its main overarching ethnic classifications are Sephardi, Mizrahi, and Romaniote Jews. Sephardic Jews are here defined as Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Jews of Western Europe and Ladino-speaking Jews of the Ottoman Empire. Mizrahi Jews encompass predominantly (Judeo-)Arabic-speaking Jews who are native to the Middle East and western Asia, and Romaniotes are Greek-speaking Jews native to the former Byzantine Empire.³⁶ This book acknowledges these three groups as constituting the principal non-Ashkenazic populations in the United States. But the emphasis in these pages is on communities of Iberian Jewish descent, which formed the majority of the non-Ashkenazic community through the first half of the twentieth century. Since then, Mizrahi Jews have vastly outnumbered both Iberian- and Greek-origin Jews. Their history and rich multilingual archives, considered only briefly in this book, deserve a separate monograph.

Readers familiar with American Jewish history will not find in these pages the traditional narrative of immigration, adversity, achievement, and impact on broader U.S. society.³⁷ Nor will they read of American Jewry as more or less a conglomerate whole that rarely interacts with other ethnic groups.³⁸ These paradigms are generally not meaningful for the history of non-Ashkenazic Jews. Rather, the focus here is on the experiences of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews with the dominant Ashkenazic community and with non-Jewish subgroups with whom they shared varying degrees of cultural and linguistic affinity. These experiences illuminate hitherto unknown phenomena in ethnoreligious identity and intra- and interethnic relations. Through an investigation of these relations, this book ponders the elements that drew Sephardi and Mizrahi immigrants apart from their new neighbors in the United States, the factors that encouraged productive encounters and rapprochement, and the ways in which they were forced to reassess and remake their ethnic identities as a result of these interactions. The ties these multiethnic Jews forged among themselves and with neighboring communities broadened—and sometimes disrupted—the panoply of Jewish, Hispanic, and Arab identities.

Because most of the immigrants landed and remained in the city of New York, Eastern Sephardi and Mizrahi history in the United States is very much a New York story. A focus on this metropolis is more broadly justified by its global significance as home to the largest Jewish population in history, with over 1.5 million residents by 1920.³⁹ Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim established much smaller communities in Los Angeles, Seattle, Atlanta, Cincinnati, Montgomery (Alabama), Indianapolis, Chicago, New Brunswick (New Jersey), San Francisco, and later in Miami.⁴⁰ These settlements are not extensively considered in this book but should be examined in greater depth as a way to appreciate New York's national impact and, conversely, the distinctive traits of smaller communities.⁴¹

As the first full-length, academic study of non-Ashkenazic Jews in the United States, this book is meant to be suggestive rather than definitive and will hopefully stimulate many additional forays into the archives.⁴² This book is written within the framework of American Jewish history, by a scholar of the Jewish past, but its relevance will hopefully be farther reaching. This prospect may be bolstered by recent demographic shifts and political developments, including the status of Hispanics as the fastest-growing minority group in the United States and the current national

focus on the Middle East and its immigrant descendants.⁴³ In light of these trends, this book offers fresh perspectives on an earlier Hispanic and Arabic presence in the country, rarely considered through the lenses of Jewish history.

Scholars and students of U.S. Jewish and ethnic history, and the lay community alike, have yet another reason to grant serious consideration to the country's non-Ashkenazic population. In a survey conducted in 2002, the Los Angeles-based Institute for Jewish and Community Research found that at least 20 percent of the country's six million Jews are "diverse Jews." This recently coined term refers to "racially and ethnically diverse" individuals who identify as "African, African American, Latino (Hispanic), Asian, Native American, Sephardic, Mizrahi and mixed-race Jews by heritage, adoption, and [*sic*] marriage." The institute's broad definition of Jewishness, as well as interview methods sensitive to the idiosyncrasies of non-Ashkenazic Jews, resulted in a population estimate significantly higher than the latest conventional figure of 5.2 million, offered by the National Jewish Population Survey in the year 2000.⁴⁴ The institute's findings suggest that the population of non-Ashkenazic Jews will exponentially increase in the coming decades. Perhaps with it will increase the awareness of the intrinsic significance of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews to the broader Jewish community and to various non-Jewish subethnic groups throughout the United States. This demographic trend may help underscore the present book's thesis, that the acknowledged portrait of American Jewish history and society remains incomplete without the integration of non-Ashkenazic Jews. The contemporary American Jewish community emerged from the interaction of its subethnic groups and cannot adequately be understood without considering its Sephardi, Mizrahi, and Romaniote legacies.

Finally, it is important to state what this study is not. The aim here is not to compose a linear history of the Sephardic community in the first half of the twentieth century or of the various institutions that Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews founded over the years. Rather, this study has the thematic aim of exploring intra- and interethnic relations between the various groups that Eastern Sephardim and, to a lesser extent, Mizrahi Jews encountered in the United States. This book is also not a call for social justice in the American Jewish community. This fact is especially important to underscore given recent studies authored by socially conscious authors who deal with Jewish multiculturalism.⁴⁵ If this book

contains any plea, it is that scholars of American Jews no longer ignore the sources documenting the experiences of non-Ashkenazim in the United States.

Sources Used for This Study

Among the central aims of this book is to turn attention to heretofore-untapped primary sources. Perhaps the richest of these sources for the first half of the twentieth century is the Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) press, a prodigious subethnic goldmine that has rarely informed any study on American Jewish immigration. The first enduring American Ladino newspaper, *La America* (“America,” 1910–1925), was joined by at least eighteen others of varying lifespans, until the complete demise of the American Ladino press in 1948. With two minor exceptions, all known Judeo-Spanish tabloids in the United States were published in New York.⁴⁶ Ladino newspapers in the United States varied politically and religiously, and they reflected the ideological diversity of their editors and readership.

Other sources that shaped this book are multilingual letters, circulars, minutes, memoirs, vintage audiotapes, documents, dramatic scripts, and photographs, gathered from archives and interviewees in Boston, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, Portland (Oregon), and Seattle. I have also drawn on articles from the Anglo-American, Anglo-Jewish, and, to a lesser extent, the American Hebrew and Yiddish press. Aside from the Ladino press, the most precious source is oral testimony. Since the mid-1990s, I have conducted interviews with dozens of Eastern Sephardic immigrants and their descendants and with what has become a sizeable group of Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, and non-Jews. These qualitative interviews have, in some cases, confirmed or embellished my archival findings and, in other cases, provided information unavailable in written sources.

Because some of my interviewees were “Mizrahi” and “Romaniote” Jews, it seems appropriate to offer a brief comment about their distinctive legacies in the United States. The country’s Arabic-speaking Jews are the focus of only one book, by Joseph A. D. Sutton, whose work deals with the Syrian community of Flatbush.⁴⁷ To date, no other book on Arabic Jewish communities has appeared, though Dina Dahbany-Miraglia is currently writing a study on Yemeni Jews.⁴⁸ The Greek-speaking

Jews of New York still await their own historian.⁴⁹ My intention during recent years has been to visit archives pertaining to Brooklyn's Syrian Jewish community, in the hope of tapping previously unknown sources pertaining to Mizrahim. There is some indirect evidence, for example, that Mizrahi Jews may have produced their own newspapers or newsletters in their native languages,⁵⁰ but the archives I have examined do not preserve any of them.⁵¹ That archival visit did not materialize. Time constraints also prevented me from giving due attention to Greek-speaking Jews. I hope the many gaps in this study will serve as incentive for future scholars, particularly those better linguistically equipped than I, to research these non-Ashkenazic communities, which were smaller, though collectively no less significant, in the twentieth century's first half.

The "Other" Jews: A Historical Overview

Jews in the Iberian Peninsula

In the autumn of 1922, José M. Estrugo set sail for Spain, the land of his medieval ancestors. Born in the Ottoman Empire, Estrugo had arrived in the United States in his youth and in 1920 became a founding member of the Sephardic community of Los Angeles. But Estrugo could find no peace in the United States, and since he was not a Zionist, Jerusalem held no allure for him. Only in Spain could he feel like "the Indian in America."⁵² In the early 1930s he reminisced, "For the first time in my life I felt truly aboriginal, native. Here I was not, I could not be an intruder! For the first time I felt very much at home, much more than in the Jewish quarter where I was born! I am not ashamed to confess that I bent down, in an outburst of indescribable emotion, and kissed the ground upon which I tread for the first time, nearly a century after the end of the Inquisition."⁵³

José M. Estrugo is a modern manifestation of the deep connections that many Sephardic Jews have felt to Spain through the ages, even centuries after their exile. This sense of belonging is anchored in historical memories that stretch back to antiquity. Not every Sephardic Jew in the twentieth century would have shared Estrugo's nostalgia or his exoner-ation of Spanish Catholic society for centuries of religious and racial persecution. But none could deny the formative power of a millennial sojourn in the Iberian Peninsula.

According to one Sephardic tradition, Jews settled in the Iberian Peninsula after the Babylonian monarch Nebuchadnezzar undertook an expedition to Spain in the sixth century B.C.E., bringing in his wake “many families of the tribe of Judah, and the house of David.” This legend was particularly popular among Sephardim in Christian lands, for it demonstrated that their ancestors were guiltless of Christ’s crucifixion in first-century Jerusalem.⁵⁴ These legends were evoked particularly during times of crisis, for example, in the months before the Jews were expelled from Spain. Muslims in Spain, who faced expulsion at the end of the sixteenth century, attempted to demonstrate their own longevity in the peninsula for similar reasons.⁵⁵

The peninsula’s first Jewish immigrants supposedly constructed cities they named after Hebrew words or toponyms of the Land of Israel. The false Hebrew etymologies that this legend attributes to Iberian place names since at least the fourteenth century underscores the ties that Sephardic Jews felt to their diasporic homeland. “Yepes,” south of Madrid, was allegedly named after Joppa (Israel’s modern-day Jaffa), and “Tavora” (from the Távora river in what is today Portugal) was said to derive from Mount Tabor in the Lower Galilee.⁵⁶ “Toledo” supposedly represented the word *Toledoth*, Hebrew for “generations.”⁵⁷ Daniel Levi de Barrios, a Spanish-born *converso* who returned to Judaism in Leghorn in the seventeenth century, pushed the Hebrew precedence further back in time when he affirmed that the Garden of Eden had been located in his native Spain. The peninsula was not named “Celtiberia” after the Celts and the Iberians, he explained, but rather after the Hebrew word for ribs (*tseluot*), recalling the biblical account in which God extracted one of Adam’s ribs during his sleep.⁵⁸ These etymologically and historically baseless legends underscore Sephardic Jews’ strong sense of belonging in the Iberian Peninsula. Naming, as one historian has argued in the context of Europe’s conquests in the New World, can be understood as an act of possession.⁵⁹ Even as they faced toward Jerusalem in their daily prayers, very few Sephardim abandoned their birthplace for Palestine; the Iberian Peninsula was their home.⁶⁰

A more widespread Sephardic legend, however, explains that Jews from the southern kingdom of Judah settled in the peninsula only after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. The classical Hebrew word for Spain is *Sefarad*, a toponym derived from the verse “The exiled of Jerusalem who are in Sefarad” (Book of Obadiah 1:20).⁶¹ Although the biblical source does not specify the location of this toponym, Jewish

exegetes since the first century C.E. have identified it with Hispania, the Roman name for the Iberian Peninsula.⁶² Most of these biblical interpreters also identified the founding of the peninsula's Jewish community with the Judeans exiled by the Romans in 70 C.E.⁶³ Jews with origins in the Iberian Peninsula are known in Hebrew as Sefaradim, which, under the influence of Ashkenazic usage, is usually pronounced SeFARDim.

There is some historical evidence that Jews settled in the peninsula during the first centuries of the Common Era. In his *Letter to the Romans* (15:24, 28), Paul expresses his intention to go to Spain to spread the gospel, which suggests a Jewish presence there by the mid-first century C.E.⁶⁴ The earliest extrabiblical evidence for a Jewish presence in the peninsula comes from archeological ruins. A tombstone excavated in the nineteenth century and now lost bore a Latin epitaph of a Jewish toddler. Particularly because the decedent was a child (as opposed to an adult man, who could have been traveling there alone as an itinerant merchant), this epitaph is irrefutable proof that a Jewish community had developed on the peninsula by around 200 C.E.⁶⁵ An epigraph subsequently unearthed has pushed back that date a century or two earlier.⁶⁶

The history of Jews in the Iberian Peninsula under various pagan, Christian, and Muslim rulers has been oft recounted and need not be repeated here.⁶⁷ Two periods, however, deserve mention, as they played a central role in shaping the images and self-representation of Sephardic Jews in the United States: the periods under Muslim and Christian rule.

The period under Muslim rule, particularly from the tenth through twelfth centuries, is among the best known in popular Jewish consciousness. That era—the so-called Spanish Golden Age—refers to the intellectual, literary, and cultural heights that prominent Sephardim achieved in Muslim Iberia.⁶⁸ The community produced courtiers, Hebrew poets and grammarians, philosophers, military leaders, and exceptional rabbinic leaders, including the legalist Moses Maimonides and Judah Halevi, sometimes called the national poet of the Jewish people.

The memory of Iberia's Christian period also played an important role in the ascribed- and self-identity of U.S. Sephardic Jews. Under Christian rule, dating from the conquest of Toledo in 1086, Jewish religious and legal status steadily declined. In 1391, wide-scale mob violence broke out, instigated by a fervent preacher and resulting in the forced conversion of tens of thousands of Jews across the whole of Spain, including the islands of Mallorca and Minorca. In Hebrew historiography, this year is known as *shenat hashemad*, or “the year of apostasy.” Many of

these new converts continued to practice Judaism or secretly to identify as Jews. They were popularly known as *marranos*, the Castilian word for “swine,” and in legal terms as New Christians (*crístianos nuevos*) or converts (*conversos*).

According to Catholic doctrine, converts to Christianity who strayed back to their ancestral faith were guilty of heresy. That many new converts to Catholicism continued to practice their former faith sub rosa was a public secret. In response to rampant secret Judaism in Spain, the Inquisition was established in 1478. The Catholic monarchs, convinced that unconverted Jews were a major factor in encouraging New Christians to practice secret Judaism, decided that the only solution was to remove the open Jewish community from Spain. In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella expelled the Jews from Spain and its provinces, including Sicily and Sardinia. In the absence of reliable archival records, modern historians have radically disagreed on the number of Jews exiled from Spain, but the figure of two hundred thousand seems reasonable.⁶⁹

In 1492, possibly half of the Spanish Jewish exiles migrated to the kingdom of Portugal,⁷⁰ where, in 1497, the entire Jewish community was forcibly converted to Catholicism. Though initially lenient toward new converts and their children, the Portuguese rulers eventually exhibited a harshness exceeding that of Spain. The Portuguese Inquisition was established in 1536 in order to uproot the Judaizing “heresy.” So brutal was its punishment that the public ceremony, in which recalcitrant Judaizers and other offenders were burnt alive, became widely known by its Portuguese name, “auto-da-fe.” Perhaps paradoxically, the emotional tie of Sephardic Jews to Portugal was even stronger than their attachment to Spain. After Portugal regained its independence in 1640 (having been forcibly united with Spain in 1580), many in the Western Sephardic Diaspora yearned to return to their native land and hoped that the monarchs would put an end to social and Inquisitorial discrimination against New Christians.⁷¹

The Iberian-Jewish Diaspora: Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire

In 1492 and 1497, open Jewish life in Spain and Portugal, respectively, came to an end.⁷² The forced converts to Catholicism who remained in the Iberian Peninsula are considered to be part of Jewish history, since many continued to practice Judaism or to identify as Jews, or were sincere

Catholics who were discriminated against for their Jewish ancestry. Some of these forced converts and their descendants managed to leave the peninsula for other locations in Western and Northwestern Europe where they could openly embrace Judaism; others left with no firm religious convictions, in search of economic and spiritual stability.⁷³ The largest communities of former secret Jews developed in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Bordeaux, and London. Having lived and participated in Catholic, and later Protestant, Christian society, these individuals represent the first Jewish encounter with modernity. Leaders from these communities took a leading role in advocating Jewish emancipation and often argued that Sephardim were more deserving of this legal privilege than Ashkenazim. France was the first country to emancipate its Jews: the Sephardim in 1790 and then a year later the Ashkenazim.⁷⁴

The Sephardim of Western Europe, most of them descended from crypto-Jews, were instrumental in the development of Jewish communities in the New World. A group of these Jews fleeing the Portuguese takeover of northern Brazil arrived in 1654 in Nieuw Amsterdam, present-day New York. Their arrival is usually marked as the founding of North America's first Jewish community.⁷⁵ The oldest Jewish congregation in the United States, Congregation Shearith Israel, traces its founding to that year.⁷⁶

Another branch of the Sephardic Diaspora developed in the "Orient," primarily in North Africa, the Balkans, and the Anatolian Peninsula. Scholars disagree as to the number of Spanish Jewish refugees who settled there after 1492, but within two or three decades tens of thousands of them had settled in Ottoman cities and towns.⁷⁷ According to Jewish chronicles, Sultan Bayezid II (1481–1512) welcomed the Jewish refugees with open arms, hoping to strengthen his empire economically. In the words of Imanuel Aboab, the Ottoman sultans allowed the Jewish refugees into their territories, "marveling that the Spaniards, who profess to be prudent and wise, would eject such a people from their realms."⁷⁸ Although these statements are not found in Ottoman documents of the era, scholars including Aron Rodrigue affirm that the empire's rulers viewed Sephardim "as a useful addition to the population."⁷⁹

The refugees encountered other Jewish communities already established in the Ottoman Empire, communities that they largely absorbed by the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁸⁰ Most of these established communities were composed of *Benei Romania* (*b'nai Roma*), or Romaniote Jews, who traced their origins to Byzantine times. A minority

were German Jews, or Ashkenazim, who had settled in the empire during the fifteenth century.⁸¹

The number of Iberian Jewish exiles who braved the perils and bore the expense of sea voyages to the Ottoman Empire was small in comparison to the number of those who fled by land to Portugal, the kingdom of Navarre, and the French region of Provence. But by the sixteenth century, Ottoman Jewry came to represent the largest Jewish community in the world. Through most of the seventeenth century, more Jews resided in the Ottoman Empire than in any other state. According to Avigdor Levy, Ottoman Jewish communities “emerged as the foremost Jewish centers in the world, rivaled, perhaps, only by those of Poland and Lithuania.”⁸²

The first century of Iberian Jewish settlement in the Ottoman Empire constituted another “golden age” for Sephardim, concomitant with the flourishing of the Ottoman Empire.⁸³ Iberian Jewish refugees and their descendants were key to the development of commerce, due in part to their multilingualism and extensive trade connections with Jewish and crypto-Jewish communities throughout the Mediterranean and Western Europe. Rabbinic learning flourished; many Ottoman cities, especially Salonika, became centers for Talmudic study, attracting students from all over the world. Jews also contributed in significant ways to science, technology, and entertainment.⁸⁴

By the late sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire began to decline, and its social and political fabric began to disintegrate. The principal cause for this deterioration was the expansion of the empire through territorial and military conquests. With this expansion, it became more difficult and costly for Ottoman rulers to maintain control over their numerous, often far-flung, territories. These challenges increased as the empire gained political enemies, such as Austria, Poland, Russia, Spain, Venice, Portugal, and Persia, and economic competitors from European industries.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to view the period from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries as a continual process of disintegration. Rather, this time should be seen as a “general curve of decline . . . punctuated by extended periods of stability, recovery, and even temporary ascent.”⁸⁶ In general, Ottoman Jewish communities suffered along with the rest of the population but were “more susceptible than others” to economic, political, and cultural upheavals.⁸⁷

The period from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries represents the era of Ottoman reform and modernization. The years

stretching from 1839 to 1876, known as the *Tanzimat* (reorganization), witnessed the improvement of roads, transportation, public health, and education. Reflecting rising rates of literacy, the empire saw an efflorescence of its printing presses, with prolific consequences for the Ladino press. An extensive bibliography of the Ladino press worldwide, published in the 1960s, identified 296 separate publications, with the bulk of these titles emanating from Salonika and Istanbul.⁸⁸

This efflorescence could not deter the final collapse of the empire. Although the direct military menace of Europe had largely subsided by the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire was now threatened by internal nationalistic separatism. Various Ottoman regions, including Greece in 1832, became sovereign states. This breakup continued through the early twentieth century. Progressive territorial disintegration, coupled with wars and natural disasters, contributed to an unprecedented Jewish exodus from the Ottoman Empire and its former regions.

By 1900, the eve of mass immigration of Ladino-speaking Jews to the United States, the now largely dismembered Ottoman Empire was home to approximately four hundred thousand Jews,⁸⁹ representing 4 percent of the world Jewish population⁹⁰ and the fifth-largest Jewish community in the world, following Russia, Austria-Hungary, the United States, and Germany.⁹¹ The *kolonia* (“colony”) that Ladino-speaking Jews established in the United States became the most important Sephardic community from the former Ottoman Empire.⁹²

The Languages of Sephardic Jews

Language, notes Hispanic studies scholar Maír José Benardete, was “the most precious possession . . . [the Jews of Spain] took with them in their exile.”⁹³ Ladino, known by scholars as Judeo-Spanish, is the language developed by Iberian Jews after their exile from the Iberian Peninsula and resettlement in the former Ottoman Empire (western Anatolia and the Balkans).⁹⁴ Based on late medieval or early modern Castilian, Ladino includes admixtures of Hebrew, Turkish, Portuguese, Aramaic, Italian, French, Greek, Arabic, and other languages spoken in the various lands where Eastern Sephardim resided. Ladino was traditionally written in Hebrew letters but gradually gave way to Romanized script with rising forces of secularization and after the revolutionary Turkish government outlawed the use of non-Roman alphabetical systems in 1928.⁹⁵

In its calque form,⁹⁶ Judeo-Spanish (in this context usually called Ladino) was used to translate sacred texts from the Hebrew, a tradition known as *ladimar*.⁹⁷ In its vernacular form, Judeo-Spanish appeared in both religious and secular literature from the sixteenth century on. From the 1540s to the early twentieth century, some three thousand Ladino books, journals, and broadsides were published on the five continents of Europe, North America, South America, Africa, and Asia.⁹⁸

One of twenty-one Jewish languages worldwide, Ladino represents the most direct parallel to the best-known Jewish diasporic language, Yiddish. Both Yiddish and Ladino are the only two major Jewish languages that did not establish as their foundations the language of their respective host countries. In other words, Jews developed not a Judeo-Russian or Judeo-Turkish, but rather a Judeo-German in Slavic lands and a Judeo-Spanish in the land of the Turks. A transported, fusion language, Ladino, like Eastern European Yiddish, is in essence a medieval European language carried from the west eastward.

There are, however, important differences. According to Uriel Weinreich, Yiddish began to develop around 1000 C.E., when French and Italian Jews began to migrate to the Rhineland.⁹⁹ Ladino, whose genesis can be traced to 1492, had a much shorter time to develop linguistically and literarily. Also, Ladino never achieved the linguistic hegemony of Yiddish. Greek Jews of Ioannina generally continued to speak Greek, while Jewish communities in Arab countries—even those that had absorbed Sephardic Jewish exiles—by and large still spoke Arabic.¹⁰⁰ The most dramatic difference is numerical and proportional. The Ladino-speaking population of the world never came close to rivaling the Yiddish-speaking masses. According to estimates from the 1930s, only 350,000 Jews worldwide spoke Ladino in the years 1900 and 1925, representing 3 percent and 2.3 percent of world Jewry, respectively. In comparison, the world's Yiddish-speaking population in those years was 7 million and 8.2 million, representing 60.6 percent and 54.7 percent of world Jewry.¹⁰¹ Immediately prior to the Nazi Holocaust, 75 percent of world Jewry spoke Yiddish.¹⁰²

Despite these small numbers and proportions, Sephardic Jews left an enduring imprint on modern Ashkenazic civilization. Perhaps the best example is the myth of Sephardic supremacy, which imagines Sephardic Jews as culturally, religiously, linguistically, and in certain contexts racially superior to their Ashkenazic brethren. First cultivated by Sephardim themselves in the Middle Ages, the myth of Sephardic supremacy

was then adopted and developed by German-speaking Ashkenazim during the age of Enlightenment. Sephardic Jews of Golden Age (Muslim) Spain, many Ashkenazic leaders maintained, were to be emulated for their integration into and contributions to non-Jewish society. Their aesthetic taste in architecture, liturgy, language, and dress was to serve as a model for an emancipated Ashkenazic Jewry.¹⁰³

Ashkenazic scholars influenced by the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (“Science of Judaism”) movement inherited these attitudes, particularly with respect to language. For many of these historians, the catchword was “grandezza,” a misplaced Italian word referring to the innate grandeur or nobility of Sephardic Jews.¹⁰⁴ According to German rabbi and historian Moritz Kayserling (1829–1905), Eastern Sephardim “preserved not only the Spanish dignity, but the Spanish idiom also; and they preserved the latter with so much love and with so much tenacity that it has remained surprisingly pure up to the present day. It must be remembered that Judaeo-Spanish, or Ladino, is no wise as corrupt a language as is the Judaeo-German.”¹⁰⁵ Similar ideas found their way into the scholarship of American Jews. New York City Reform rabbi Maurice Henry Harris (1859–1930) stated in his 1907 history of medieval Jewry that the Iberian exiles preserved “their Spanish and Portuguese languages which they spoke with purity, as half sacred tongues.”¹⁰⁶ As Harris correctly understood, Western Sephardic Jews spoke not Ladino but rather modern Portuguese and Spanish.

Eastern Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews: Defining the Terms

Ethnic terminology is a complicated and often heated issue in the historiography of non-Ashkenazic Jews. What term or terms should be used to designate non-Ashkenazic Jews from the Anatolian Peninsula, the Balkans, North Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia? The prevailing tendency is to group all of them together under the rubric “Sephardic Jews.”

The trend to group together widely variant Jewish communities can be traced, in part, to the nineteenth-century scholarly paradigm that subclassified the Jewish people into two distinct races, the Jews of the “North,” in Central and Eastern Europe, and the Jews native to the “Orient” and the Mediterranean basin.¹⁰⁷ There are various ways to explain the triumph of the word “Sephardic” as the designator of Jews from these last two regions. Judith Laikin Elkin attributes the widespread adoption

of the term “Sephardic” to the “aristocratic cachet” of a Hispanic origin, “more desirable than a connection to Moslem culture.”¹⁰⁸ Similarly, Haim Vidal Septhi points out that some of the alternative terms, such as “Arab” or “North African,” bear pejorative connotations.¹⁰⁹ Mark R. Cohen argues that lumping Iberian-origin Jews together with non-Ashkenazim indigenous to the Middle East and Central Asia indicates, in part, the “overwhelming historical influence that Jews from Spain had on Jewry in the Ottoman Empire and in Morocco.”¹¹⁰

In the context of American Jewish history, a stronger motivation was probably terminological convenience. Communal leaders in the United States, whether Western or Eastern Sephardic, needed a compact designation that would encompass all recently immigrated non-Ashkenazic Jews, the majority of whom were of remote Iberian origin. This need became evident with the mass immigration of non-Ashkenazic Jews in the 1910s.¹¹¹

However, these leaders also realized the importance of distinguishing the long-established Western Sephardim from the recent non-Western immigrants. Ultimately, the prevailing terms among both Jews and non-Jews during the first half of the twentieth century were “Oriental Jews” or “Levantine Jews.”¹¹² These new labels not only preserved the elite status of Western Sephardim but also more accurately described Arabic- and Greek-speaking Jews bereft of any Iberian ancestry.¹¹³ Concurrently, various additional terms were invented to distinguish the majority Eastern Sephardic population from the smaller numbers of other non-Ashkenazic Jewries: “Oriental” or “Levantine Sephardim,” “Spanish Jews,” “Spagnuali,” “Ladinos,” “Turkish Jews,” “Turkish Sephardim,” and “Turkinos.” Romaniote Jews were sometimes identified as Greek-speaking Jews, while Jews of Arab lands often fell under the rubric of “Arabic-speaking Jews,” “Syrian,” or “Arabian.” Western Sephardim—descendants of Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Jews whose ancestors left the Iberian Peninsula for other locations in Western and Northern Europe and the Americas but never migrated to the Ottoman Empire—were sometimes termed “Old Sephardim” to distinguish them from Ladino-speaking “New Sephardim.”

Over the past few decades, scholars and lay people have continued to debate the terms “Sephardim,” “Eastern” or “Levantine Jews,” and “Eastern” or “Levantine Sephardim.” The controversy generally lies between those who insist that Eastern Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews should collectively be categorized as “Sephardim”¹¹⁴ and those who argue that

the term as a blanket categorization overlooks vastly divergent linguistic, cultural, ancestral, and historical legacies.¹¹⁵ Aside from this debate, there is an unfortunate tendency, borne of ignorance or intellectual sloppiness, to lump all non-Ashkenazic Jews together as constituents of one homogeneous subethnic group.¹¹⁶ Finally, the political exigency of uniting all non-Ashkenazic Jews has led many scholars to force square pegs into round holes. They argue that even though non-Ashkenazic Jews are often not Iberian in origin, their culture and religious traditions *must* be the same or similar to Sephardic ritual.¹¹⁷ This argument is a classic example of a contemporary assumption (that all these diverse Jews are Sephardic) being awkwardly imposed on the past. As I will argue in the next chapter, it is far more useful to conceptualize non-Ashkenazim in the United States as a *social* rather than an *ethnic* group.

Perhaps the most important point is that non-Ashkenazic Jews in the immigrant era saw themselves as distinct subgroups and organized accordingly. Language (Ladino, Arabic, Greek) was central to both communication and identity and informed their workaday, social, organizational, and romantic lives. Even as many of them clung to microidentities, naming their synagogues and societies after natal cities and towns, language was an overarching unifying force.¹¹⁸ A consideration of ethnic terminology in the Ottoman Empire also supports the case for upholding subethnic distinctions. Jews indigenous to North Africa and the Middle East were sometimes denoted as *toshavim* (Hebrew for “settlers”) to distinguish them from the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 (*mego-rashim*). Jews in the Ottoman Empire’s Arab provinces were subdivided into ethnic enclaves that distinguished between Arabic-speaking Jews (*musta’rabim*, *mustarabi*, or *mista’arvim*, all meaning “like Arabs,” or *Moreschi*, denoting “Moors”), Sephardim, Maghrebis, Italians, and Ashkenazim.¹¹⁹

The two Sephardic groups that are the focus of this study are Ladino-speaking Sephardim, also identified as Eastern Sephardim, and Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Sephardim, referred to as Western Sephardim. Both of these groups trace their remote ancestry to the Iberian Peninsula, and more recently to the Ottoman Empire (in the case of Eastern Sephardim), and Western and Northern Europe and the Americas (in the case of Western Sephardim). Arabic- and Judeo-Arabic-speaking Jews, most of them indigenous to North Africa and the Middle East, are referred to in this study as Mizrahim, the Hebrew word for “Eastern,” which gained currency in Israel during the early 1990s, primarily in reference to Jews



Cover of the annual publication of the Sephardic Brotherhood of America, 1923, originally founded in 1915 as a mutual-aid society to benefit Eastern Sephardim of primarily Salonikan origin. The organization later anglicized the first word of its name to “Sephardic.”

from Arab lands.¹²⁰ Greek-speaking Jews native to Ioannina and other cities of the former Eastern Roman Empire are identified as Romaniote Jews.¹²¹ Where appropriate, following the example of most communal leaders of the time, all non-Ashkenazic Jews, with the exception of Western Sephardim, are sometimes collectively identified as Eastern or Levantine Jews. For reasons explained in the following chapters, Ashkenazic Jews born in the Ottoman Empire sometimes fall under this rubric as well.

The deficiency of all these terms has been widely recognized in both scholarly and communal circles since the beginning of the twentieth century.¹²² First is the question of actual descent. The historical intermingling of various Jewish populations means that some Ladino-speaking Jews had Romaniote or Ashkenazic ancestry, or that Arabic-speaking Jews might have traced some of their genealogy to the Iberian Peninsula. The case of modern-day Syrian Jews is emblematic. The first Jews in

Syria were indigenous to the Middle East and were joined by significant numbers of Iberian Jewish exiles only after the Expulsion of 1492. Spanish Jewish settlers there quickly gained ascendancy and imposed their prayer rite and language on the native Jews. Thus, some Syrian Jews have ancestry indigenous to the Middle East, others trace their origins to the Iberian Peninsula, and still others are a combination of both. So too, Jews of Ioannina in northwestern Greece trace their origins to the thirteenth century, if not before, and are therefore indigenous to the region. But linguistic traces, names, and religious traditions suggest that some Sephardic exiles intermingled with the historically Greek-speaking Jewish community after 1492.¹²³ Examples such as these may explain why some modern-day descendants are inconsistent when describing their own geographical origins.¹²⁴

It is also important to point out that “Mizrahim” is especially problematic. This term seeks to collectively designate populations that are culturally, linguistically, and geographically much more diverse than either Ashkenazic or Sephardic Jews. Michael Pollack, a historian of China’s Jews, correctly observes that this blanket term deprives these populations “of their unique histories and their own rich diversity of customs and practices.”¹²⁵ Moreover, the terms “Eastern” and “Levantine,” as well as their Hebrew translation, “Mizrahi,” are laden with geographical ethnocentrism. Only some of these populations are eastern from the perspective of certain places in Europe. In point of fact, North African Jewry has historically defined itself as part of the West (*Maghreb* in Arabic).¹²⁶ As a rejection of similar geographical ethnocentrism, the field of South Asian studies abandoned the term “Oriental” decades ago.¹²⁷

This study also briefly considers Hispanics of the U.S. Southwest who have in recent decades claimed crypto-Jewish ancestry; some have joined the “mainstream” Jewish community. Here, too, the question of terminology is delicate. Janet Liebman Jacobson, in her recent research on this population, found that her informants identified variably as “Chicano/a (Mexican American)” and “Hispanic (having Spanish ancestry).” In her published analysis, Jacobson chose to use the term “Latina/o” to encompass both categories.¹²⁸ Stanley Hordes, in his study of crypto-Judaism in the American Southwest, favors the term “Hispanos,” which he defines as descendants of Spanish colonists.¹²⁹ In the context of these modern-day individuals who claim crypto-Jewish descent, the present study employs the term “Hispanic,” indicating a person of Iberian descent.

1

Immigration, Ethnicity, and Identity

America Is Mine!

In the spring of 1915, twenty-four-year-old Isaac Azriel, a native of Salonika, arrived at Ellis Island aboard the SS *Vasilefs Constantinos*. The owner of a carpet business, Azriel was conversant in Hebrew, French, German, and Turkish. Unexpectedly, Azriel was detained after a medical official diagnosed him with a deformity of the spine.¹ Immigration officials then promised to release him on condition that he procure a sponsor closely related to him. After ten days in limbo, he was informed that he would be deported, though no one could tell him the precise reason. An Ashkenazic official from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) had taken down his name and tried to hearten him with daily visits, but the decision to deport Azriel had already been made, and not much was formally done on his behalf.

Then, Azriel noticed in a trash can a copy of the Ladino newspaper *La America*. He wrote a letter to the journal appealing for help, and within two days Aharón Pardo, a young man dispatched by the editorial office, came to his aid. Only then did HIAS take Azriel's case seriously and successfully petitioned Washington. Had Pardo not intervened, Azriel would have been returned to his native city depleted of all his savings, which he described as "a sizeable fortune."²

The case of Sarah Baruh Kamhi also illustrates the ongoing indispensability of Eastern Sephardic mediators in deportation cases. Kamhi, a native of Monastir (the present-day city of Bitola in the Republic of Macedonia), who had had most recently resided in Skopje (Serbia), arrived at Ellis Island aboard the SS *Majestic* in January 1923. Although she presented the address of her guarantor in Rochester, New York, her brother-in-law Ya'akov Alva, Kamhi was also slated for deportation. This time the reason was illiteracy.³ Alva contacted the Sephardic Brotherhood