The Erasure of Sephardic Jewry

Mixed Orthodox Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities exist all around the United States. Most of the time, the Ashkenazi voices are stronger than the Sephardic ones, leading the former to dominate the latter.

Consider, for example, that the oldest American synagogue was once a Sephardic synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island but today practices Ashkenazi customs. This phenomenon of Sephardic customs changing to fit into Ashkenazi life is not uncommon. In recent years, many Sephardic rabbis have begun donning black hats—an Ashkenazi custom foreign to the traditional Sephardic community.

Attention to Sephardic practice and heritage is largely a relic of these mixed communities, leading to the erasure of a portion of the Jewish People. (While I recognize there is a difference between Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry, for this article, I will use the term "Sephardic" as an umbrella term to refer to non-Ashkenazi and non-Yemenite Jews.)

With Sephardim only comprising about 3-4% of America's Jewish population, some might think this prioritization makes sense. However, as mixed Jewish communities continue to grow and expand, Ashkenazi institutions ought to recognize not only the contributions of Sephardic Jewry but also the history and diversity of the Jewish People. Preserving Sephardic Jewry and honoring the diverse components of our Jewish identity is vital.

I experienced this firsthand.

Growing up in Los Angeles, I attended a Modern Orthodox elementary school that was officially “Sephardic,” but that only manifested in our *nusach tefilla*. Otherwise, it was entirely Ashkenazi. I then attended an Ashkenazi Modern Orthodox high school and Yeshiva University for college.

As a first-generation American with Syrian and Egyptian parents, my experience of my Sephardic identity and practices came only through my mom. She taught me the Syrian pronunciation of words, as well as Sephardic halachot. As such, my family grew up using the same set of glass dishes for dairy and meat, but in school I was taught the laws requiring two separate sets—a practice that, at least according to Sephardic halacha, is unnecessary.

I also never learned general Sephardic history in school. I was fascinated when my parents taught me the history of Syrian and Egyptian Jews. Aleppo was home to the Aleppo Codex—the oldest copy of the Torah that we have today—and should have been mentioned in the classroom as an important city in Jewish history. Alexandria was a significant center of Jewish learning and culture, notable for the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (the Septuagint). Even growing up amidst LA’s large Persian Jewish community, I learned much about Jewish life and history in Iran from my friends’ stories—a topic my school, despite a sizable Persian population, never covered.

Sephardic Jews were also the subject of much racism when they immigrated to Israel in the 20th century, a painful component of Israeli history that is hardly spoken about in Ashkenazi schools. My own grandfather, who was kicked out of Egypt in 1956 and subsequently made Aliyah, was fired from his position at a large international bank after the manager learned he was Sephardi. Another notable instance is the infamous Yemenite Children Affair (*Parashat Yaldei Teiman*) from 1948 into the early 1950s. Thousands of Yemenite children in Israel were kidnapped from immigration camps, separated from parents, declared deceased without certificates, and given to Ashkenazi families or orphanages. This exemplifies the historical mistreatment and marginalization of non-Ashkenazi Jews, whose histories are often overlooked in schools.

In the United States, Sephardic Jews were not even initially recognized as Jews. When the first wave of Syrian Jews immigrated to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some tried to establish themselves in the Lower East Side where Ashkenazi Jews lived. They were referred to derogatively as "Arabische Yidden"—"Arab Jews" in Yiddish. Some doubted if Syrian Jews were even Jewish. Sephardic Jews were also referred to as "Oriental Jews," in order to differentiate them from the cultured and sophisticated Western civilization.

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Any Sephardic history that I learned was from outside the classroom. I often encountered friends or fellow students (even in college) who did not know basic facts about Sephardim, such as Syria housing a significant Jewish community until the 1990s or Iran and Morocco still being home to Jews today.

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Over a decade ago, on June 23, 2014, the Knesset declared November 30 a national day of commemoration for the 850,000 Jewish refugees who were displaced from Arab countries and Iran in the 20th century. In December 2014, I attended the UN's first commemoration of this historic event. It was touching to hear Sephardic Jewish speakers acknowledge the terrible treatment of Jews by Arab countries, particularly after Israel's establishment. I was certain this commemoration would become an annual event.

In the years since, I haven't heard of many widespread commemorations in the United States, and I'm sure to most readers, this may be the first time you are even hearing about this. Even small changes, like having schools commemorate this day, can help promote recognition of Sephardic Jewry.

Increased Sephardic integration into American Ashkenazi communities warrants communal recognition. For example, many Uzbeki and Iranian Jews immigrated to New York and Los Angeles, respectively, over the last 50 years. Sephardic Jews integrated into many of the Ashkenazi elementary and high schools, as well as Jewish universities, such as Yeshiva University and Touro. Therefore, it's especially important that Sephardic history, culture, and halachot are taught in the classroom and beyond. This will not only allow Sephardic Jews to learn their identity and traditions, but also help Ashkenazi Jews understand a significant portion of Jewry that has greatly contributed to overall Jewish identity and law.

Take, for example, modern Hebrew literature. Many Iraqi Jews wrote about the Farhud (the 1941 riots in Iraq that resulted in the murder of nearly 180 Jews), and composed poems in memory of the Ten Martyrs of 1969 (Jews who were accused of spying for Israel). Sami Shalom Chetrit, a modern Sephardic poet, helped publish a three-volume work just of modern Mizrahi writings. Further back in Jewish history, Sephardic Jews like Solomon Ibn Gabirol contributed many *piyyutim* and poems.

In the realm of Jewish law, Sephardic contributions are impossible to overlook. Maimonides, one of the most prolific and influential scholars in Jewish history, compiled the Mishneh Torah, a code of law still heeded and studied to this day. He was also an astronomer and physician who championed the Torah UMadda philosophy 1,000 years before it was coined in 20th century America. The Shulchan Aruch, composed by the prominent Spanish scholar Rabbi Yosef Karo, is the most widely accepted code of Jewish law, and is the basis for the commentary of the great Ashkenazi commentator, Rabbi Moshe Isserles. Much of Ashkenazi law is based upon the writings of the Shulchan Aruch, itself a Sephardic code of law. These monumental contributions to Jewish life are not appreciated enough as contributions of the Sephardic world.

Ashkenazi rabbis also ought to do research on Sephardic halacha and acknowledge that other customs may differ. The 20th century saw a number of prominent Sephardic rabbis, including Hakham Yomtob Yedid, Rabbi Shalom Messas, and Rabbi Yitzhak Kaduri, just to name a few. Sephardic Jews must not lose their laws and customs that have been richly preserved for so many generations.

Half of Jewish law and history stem from Sephardic Jewry. It's time Ashkenazi Jews learn more about how the other half lives.

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