

Sephardic Communities in Latin America – Past and Present

Margalit Bejarano

This article is a preliminary report on a study that attempts to reconstruct the present map of the Sephardic diaspora in Latin America and to examine the links between ethnic identity and religiosity. It forms part of a research project on Sephardic communities in Latin America whose objectives are to collect written and oral documentation on Jews from the Middle East and North Africa in Latin America, to foment research and university teaching, and to prepare the infrastructure for comparative studies.¹

The purpose of this article is to analyze the ethnic composition and main characteristics of present-day Sephardic organizations from a historic and comparative perspective. The first **part** will discuss some theoretical premises and the historical background; the second will present the results of a questionnaire – that had only a partial response – distributed among the Sephardic institutions throughout Latin America.

Organization and Identity

The Jewish organizations in Latin America, like those of other minority groups, were created on a voluntary basis in response to the needs of the immigrants. The different spheres of activity represented in the infrastructure of Jewish institutional life reflect the needs of the founders of each organization. Since Jews had to provide their own religious services, they created synagogues and burial societies that were later transformed into religious communities. They established economic, medical, and philanthropic organizations to meet the insufficient social services provided by their respective countries, as well as in response to the demands by local authorities that immigrant associations be responsible for the welfare of their members.²

Similar explanations may be given for the establishment of clubs for sport, culture, and recreation, schools, youth movements, and Zionist and other political organizations that resulted from specific needs. The history of each individual institution may thus be interpreted in view of its capability to continue to satisfy the needs of its members and its adaptability to changing circumstances.³

Voluntary organization, however, was not merely a result of social and cultural necessities. It was shaped under the influence of other motives, such as the customs and concepts brought over from the mother country, mutual relations with other co-ethnic groups, and acculturation in the majority societies. We will define these motives as “sources of ethnic identification.” Adopting the assertion of Ignacio Klich and Jeffrey Lesser that “individuals and groups do not have one ethnicity, but rather multiple ethnicities that operate both in parallel and intersecting planes,”⁴ we may argue that Jewish institutional life is subject to multiple sources of ethnic identification.

Jewish identity, as a source of ethnic identification, may take the form of religious conviction, membership in the organized community, a sense of personal connection with the Shoah, and solidarity with other fellow Jews.⁵ *Sub-ethnic Jewish* groups have their specific sources of identification with their cultural heritage and in trends of continuity with the communities of origin. *Israel* serves as an important source of identification for political, social, and religious matters. In addition, we should bear in mind the centrality of *local* identity.

The history of the Jews in the Diaspora is shaped by the impact of the host societies. After three or four generations of life in Latin America, Jews integrated into their new social milieu, absorbed the local cultures, and sense allegiance to their respective nationality. At the same time, however, they may be more sensitive to differences than to similarities, as defined by Simon Herman: “Identity implies both sameness and uniqueness.... Members of a minority – much more so than members of a majority – are conscious of being marked off from certain others.”⁶ The degree of being – or feeling – marked off may vary, depending on the character of each country,

as illustrated by the two extreme cases of Brazil and Mexico. The former is an open, multi-racial society with strong assimilatory forces, while the latter's self image is based on a *mestisaje* that lacks Jewish ingredients. The "otherness" of the Jews may perpetuate their being marked off and strengthen their segregation, not diminishing, however, the centrality of their Mexican identity.

In comparison with the Ashkenazim, who comprise the dominant Jewish groups in most Latin American countries, the Sephardim have different religious rites and communal frameworks that continue the heritage of their communities of origin in the Middle East and North Africa. Though a number of Sephardic immigrants from Greece, Rhodes, Yugoslavia, and Italy arrived in Latin America as refugees or DPs, the general approach of the Sephardim to the Shoah is not related to personal experiences. Affiliation with the State of Israel finds its expression through a separate Sephardic Zionist roof organization – FESELA (Federación de Entidades Sefardíes de América Latina). Links with Israeli society as well as with other diaspora communities are generally limited to fellow Sephardic groups. Individual identities with respect to the Latin American environment may thus be defined not by one hyphen, but by two: Argentine-Sephardic-Jewish, Damascene-Mexican-Jewish, or Moroccan-Venezuelan-Jewish.⁷

In the Ashkenazi sector, historical divisions between Jews from eastern and central Europe are still relevant in determining the different characteristics of their respective organizations, but identification with individual communities of origin has never been so marked as among the Sephardim. The *landsmanschaften* – frameworks for persons coming from the same hometown or region – supplied some of the basic social necessities of the first-generation immigrants. They revived following the Shoah to commemorate the exterminated families and lost communities. Nevertheless, the impact of these institutions in shaping the infrastructure of Ashkenazi organization has always been inferior to that of ideological differences, social stratification, and attitudes towards religion.

In the Sephardic sector, communal frameworks are still defined by the country or town of origin of the founders. It is not clear, however, whether this structural division, inherited from previous generations, is still valid as a reflection of the present situation. A number of books published recently to commemorate the history of individual communities, such as *Presencia Sefaradi en la Argentina* and *Historia de Una Alianza*, stress the characteristics of each ethnic group and the impact of the old home in the Middle East or North Africa.⁸ These books may be perceived as evidence of the persistence of group identities based on the town of origin or, alternately, as the erection of monuments to a vanishing world.

Who is a Sephardic Jew?

The Jewish population treated in this study under the general term of Sephardim is composed of four groups, with different geographical and cultural backgrounds.

1. Direct descendants of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, who immigrated to the Caribbean Protestant colonies from the Portuguese communities of western Europe, and after independence settled in the Latin American republics.
2. Immigrants from North Africa, especially from the northwestern coast of Morocco, and since the 1950s also Jews from Egypt.
3. Jews from Turkey, Greece, Rhodes, Bulgaria and the former Yugoslavia who spoke Judezmo or Ladino and identified with the Sephardic tradition. Jews from Italy generally joined this group.
4. Jews from the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire, in particular from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. The latter, however, were divided among Arabic- and Ladino-speaking immigrants coming from different towns in Palestine.

The use of Sephardim as a comprehensive term for all these groups is subject to debate. In his study on Sephardim in the United States, Joseph Papo summarizes the divergence between the “purists,” who hold an exclusive definition of the term Sephardi as bearing Iberian elements, and the supporters of an inclusive definition, who point out that the Ladino-speaking “quintessential Sephardim...frequently

succeeded in transmitting significant elements of their cultural heritage to their Jewish neighbors.”⁹

In his essay on the historical roots of the Kol Shearith Israel Congregation in Panama, Ralph de Lima Valencia argues that the term Sephardim is limited to the descendants of the Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal who maintained the Hispanic tradition, and argues that “it is erroneous to catalogue as Sephardim the Jews that lived in Persia and other Jewish communities in the Middle East...who had not had any historic ties with the Iberian Peninsula, but remained in the Near East for long centuries.”¹⁰

Nissim Elnecavé, in his encyclopedic work *Los hijos de Ibero-Franconia*, presents an opposite approach, according to which all the Jewish communities that do not stem from an Ashkenazi origin are part of the Sephardic world. Emphasizing the common Sephardic background of all the Jewish communities in the Mediterranean Basin, which he defines as a *mare nostrum sephardicum*, he includes among them communities in countries that had no direct contact with the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, such as Yemen, Iran, and India.¹¹

The different approach of these two authors derived from their attitude towards the majority Jewish group that threatened their particular identity. Kol Shearith Israel was founded in 1876 by Portuguese Jews from Curaçao, St. Thomas, and other Caribbean islands, who were well integrated in the upper bourgeoisie of Panama. In the 1920s new groups of Sephardim from the Middle East, the Balkan countries, and North Africa started to emigrate to Panama, gradually becoming the dominant Jewish group both in numbers and in religious influence. De Lima Valencia stressed the Iberian character of the Sephardim in an attempt to defend the primacy of the descendants of the Curaçaoan Jews over the immigrants from the Middle East.

The attitude of Elnecavé derives from his personal experience when he arrived in Argentina as an immigrant from Turkey and was rejected by the numerically dominant Jewish group that was unwilling to accept as equally Jewish those who did

not speak Yiddish. His work presents the cultural diversity of the Sephardic sector against the monopolization of the Jewish identity by the Ashkenazim:

Within Judaism we, the Sephardim, are a different tribe...that doesn't want to be engulfed by a numerical majority. It wishes and must preserve its distinct Jewish characteristics – without ceasing to be one Jewish people (*sin dejar de ser el pueblo judío uno sólo*) – so that the different shades of Jewish creativity will be multi-faceted and a genuine expression of all the colors of its spectrum.¹²

A third approach, common in Israel in popular as well as in academic use, is to divide the non-Ashkenazi sectors into two distinctive groups – Sephardim and Orientals. Thus the Jerusalem-based research institute Misgav Yerushalayim is called The Institute for Research of the Sephardi and Oriental Jewish Heritage. Recently, scholars of Judaic Studies in the United States adopted this approach by substituting the dual term “Sephardi/Mizrahi” for the long-used “Sephardic Studies.”¹³

The four groups of Latin American Sephardim mentioned above do not fit into the dual division between Iberian and Arabic Jews. Ladino-speaking Jews from Turkey share the Hispanic tradition with the Sephardic-Portuguese from the Caribbeans, but their social and cultural background is similar to that of other communities from the Middle East. The Jews from Eretz Israel, as well as those originating in North Africa, come from both a Hispanic and an Arabic origin. Moreover, North African Jews are by definition *maghrebi* – occidentals – and cannot possibly be classified as orientals.

My conclusion is that the general term Sephardim – as a common denominator for a variety of sub-ethnic groups – is more adequate for the Latin American context. In this I follow the study of Papo who, regardless of existing divergences, decided to consider “as Sephardim all those Jews whose religious rituals, liturgy and Hebrew pronunciation bear the imprint of a common non-Ashkenazi tradition, and who consider themselves to be part of the Sephardi world.”¹⁴ This view may be justified historically by the fact that the Jews expelled from Spain exerted an influence on all of the Mediterranean Basin, and although Moslem-Arabic culture and language

prevailed over the Iberian in the Ottoman eastern provinces, similar religious patterns were created – in halakhic rules, characteristics of rabbinical leadership, and rites of worship. In Israel, which is an important source of identification for the contemporary Latin American communities, the official religious establishment is clearly divided between the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi and the Rishon Lezion – the Sephardic Chief Rabbi. Most of the rabbis who belong to the Sephardic rabbinate, as well as the members of the Shas political party that claims to represent Sephardic Orthodoxy, come from an Arabic-speaking background, but identify themselves as Sephardim.

Some Historical Characteristics

The oldest Sephardic group in Latin America is that of the Caribbean Jews whose history dates from the seventeenth century. Following the decline of the Dutch and English colonies, they settled on the mainland and formed the oldest Jewish communities in Hispanic America on the coasts of Venezuela and Greater Colombia. Most of the Caribbean Jews were gradually assimilated in a process defined by Mordechai Arbell as “comfortable disappearance.” The only surviving organized community of this group is that of Kol Shearith Israel in Panama.¹⁵

Arbell points out that the gap between the Orthodox Sephardic leadership imported from Europe and the liberal and tolerant atmosphere among the members of the community motivated their affiliation with the Reform movement in the United States, and hence the loss of identity: “The Reform movement introduced its own prayers, and brought its own religious leaders to the islands. Gradually it began erasing the Sephardi roots and traditions so dear to the Spanish-Portuguese communities.”¹⁶ As we shall see below, a similar problem affects Ladino-speaking communities today. Nevertheless, the conflict between diverse traditions is not sufficient to explain the process of assimilation, caused mainly by the small size of the Jewish-Portuguese communities and their affinity with the host societies. The persistence of small communities depends on the links with similar ethnic groups that

enable the diffusion of “new blood,” or with the presence of larger Jewish groups that can shelter the separate identity, offering communal services and Jewish spouses.

North African Jews were able to resist assimilation due to the constant immigration from Tetuan and Tangier. The small communities founded in the nineteenth century along the Amazon River were gradually abandoned or disintegrated, but the communities in Belém, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Buenos Aires, Cordoba, Rosario, and other towns of the interior survived due to the continuous relations with the mother communities, as well as among the new communities.¹⁷

The largest Moroccan community developed in Caracas as a result of several waves of immigration. Constant mobility and family relations with other Spanish-Moroccan communities in Latin America, Spain, North Africa (Ceuta and Melilla), and Israel help to maintain the particular tradition of the communities of origin, including the use of the Hakitía (a combination of Spanish, Arabic, and Hebrew). Cooperation with other Jewish groups – Sephardic and Ashkenazi – in education and other communal services facilitates the defense against trends towards assimilation.¹⁸

Jews from Turkey and the Balkan countries are generally characterized by religious laxity and an ardent support of Zionism. The first generation of immigrants was able to benefit from the presence of a spiritual leadership, educated in the Sephardic rabbinical schools of the Middle East, whose tolerant attitude towards trends of modernization helped to bridge the gap between strict religious observance and integration into the Latin American environment.

The Ladino-speaking communities are dispersed throughout the continent, the largest being in Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, Montevideo, Santiago, and practically in every capital as well as in the large provincial towns.¹⁹ None of these communities developed a higher school of Jewish religious learning, and they depend on imported spiritual leadership. The two alternatives they face are acceptance of Orthodox rabbis from the existent Sephardic reservoir, who are generally too strict for their taste, or affiliation with the Conservative or Reform movements, that may supply a response to their religious needs but at the same time

may cause the loss of their Sephardic identity. This problem has not been studied, but my personal observation in the case of the Buenos Aires community is that for religious purposes there is a tendency towards “assimilation” among the Ashkenazim, simultaneously with a cultural search for Sephardic roots, manifested in the activities of CIDICSEF (Center for Research and Diffusion of Sephardic Culture) and in the publication of *Sefardica* – a periodical of historical and literary studies, issued under the auspices of FESELA.

The fourth group, which is gradually attaining dominance in the Sephardic sector, is that of Arabic-speaking Jews, mainly from Aleppo and Damascus. Historically, this group has been the most religiously observant among the Latin American communities, but during the last two decades it is undergoing a process of Orthodox extremism.²⁰ Strict Orthodox patterns of observance are manifested in the lifestyle of these communities, which live in a secluded social environment. The strong impact of the religious leadership on communal affairs finds an outstanding manifestation in the case of Rabbi Sion Levy in Panama, who is the most influential leader in the entire Jewish community.²¹

The Orthodox Syrian communities developed large educational networks that, in addition to the primary and secondary schools, supply two major needs: the educational preparation of the Jewish woman as the pillar of the family in order to assure Jewish continuity, and higher religious education for men, in order to create the future religious and communal leaders.

As Orthodox Jews, the Syrian communities are less affected by tendencies of demographic regression than other Jewish groups; as a consequence, the internal balance between the Sephardic and Ashkenazi population is gradually changing. The study conducted by DellaPergola and Lerner in 1990 on the Jewish community of Mexico showed that the dominant Ashkenazi group was losing its majority: the Ashkenazim then accounted for about 45 percent of the Jewish population, the Ladino-speaking Sephardim for 13 percent, and the Syrian communities for 42 percent.²²

The Study

There are many lacunae in studies of Sephardic communities in Latin America, in particular those dealing with recent times. In order to gather some basic information, a questionnaire was sent out to the presidents of seventy-five organizations we were able to locate.²³ Responses were received only from twenty-seven organizations: thirteen in Argentina – seven from Buenos Aires and six from the Interior; five in Brazil – one from São Paulo, two from Rio de Janeiro, one from Manaus, and one from Rio Grando do Sul; three from Mexico City; two from Venezuela – one from Caracas and one from Montevideo; two from Colombia (Bogota and Cali), one from Peru (Lima); and one from the Cuban community in Miami – the successor of the pre-Castro Sephardic community in Havana.

Among the organizations that filled in the questionnaires are the communal organizations of Aleppan and Ladino-speaking Jews in Buenos Aires (but not the Damascene and Moroccan ones) and the three communal organizations of Mexico (Aleppan, Damascene, and Ladino-speakers). In the case of Brazil, the main communal organizations did not respond to the questionnaire; neither has the important Sephardic community in Panama.

The total number of members reported by the responding organizations is 15,553. In most cases (especially among the large communal organizations) members are heads of families and not individuals. If we deduct the community of Miami (470 families) and Naamat (that did not report the number of members), the total membership reported by the communal organizations in Latin America that responded is, therefore, 15,083. Assuming that each member represents an average of 3.5 persons, our study might comprise a population of around 52,750 persons, which may account for about half of the total Sephardic population in Latin America (see Table 1).

According to a report published by FESELA there are about 180,000 Sephardim among the 450,000 Jews living today in Latin America.²⁴ Taking as a basis the

estimates of the *American Jewish Year Book* of 2003, my appraisal is that the Sephardic population in Latin America is much smaller, perhaps no more than 105,000 persons, according to the following calculations.

Table 1: Estimated Number of Sephardim

Country	General Jewish ²⁵	Sephardim
Argentina	187,000	37,400
Brazil	97,000	19,400
Mexico	40,000	22,000
Chile	20,900	5,000
Uruguay	20,000	4,500
Venezuela	15,700	7,000
Panama	5,000	4,000
Colombia	3,400	1,000
Peru	2,500	800
Costa Rica	2,500	750
Other Central America	4,600	1,300
Other South America	<u>2,500</u>	<u>1,000</u>
Total	401,100	104,150

The two oldest responding organizations were founded in the nineteenth century by Moroccan Jews – one in Rio de Janeiro (1840) and the other in Santa Fe, Argentina (1895). Nineteen organizations were founded between 1910 and 1933 (three between 1910 and 1920, fourteen between 1920 and 1930, and two in 1932–33); two (including Naamat) in the 1940s, and one in 1970. Of the three organizations founded in the 1980s one was a fusion of two established in the 1920s in Cordoba and the other was the Sephardic Cuban Congregation in Miami, that intended to replace the communal organization of Havana founded in 1914. We may thus conclude that the majority of the organizations were founded before 1933, particularly during the 1920s (see Table 2).

Table 2: Period of Foundation and Country

Period	Argentina	Brazil	Mexico	Venezuela	Colombia	Miami	Peru	Uruguay	Total
Until 1910	1	1							2
1910–	10	1	2		2		1		16

1930									
After 1930	2	3	1	1		1		1	9
Total	13	5	3	1	2	1	1	1	27

The main purpose of the questionnaire was to compare the country of origin of the organizations' founders with the origin of the present members, in order to examine to what degree ethnicity has been preserved. Twenty-two organizations were founded by persons from the same ethnic origin. Out of the five of mixed origin, three were established in the provincial cities of Argentina and one in Cali (Colombia). The fifth organization, the Alianza Monte Sinai in Mexico, was founded in 1912 as the general framework for all Jews living at that time in Mexico, and was later transformed into the communal organization of the Jews from Damascus (see Table 3).

Table 3: Preservation of Ethnic Origin

Origin of founders	Origin of present members			
	Syria and Lebanon	Turkey and Balkans	Morocco	Mixed composition
Syria 8	5			3
Turkey 11		5		6
Morocco 3			3	
Mixed 5	1			4

The tendency to preserve ethnic origin is more evident if we classify respondents according to groups of Arabic-speakers (that include Jews from Aleppo, Damascus, Lebanon, Morocco, and Egypt) and Ladino-speakers (Turkey, Balkan countries, and Italy). The tendency of the Arabic-speakers to maintain their ethnicity is conditioned, however, by their concentration in large urban centers. The tendency of Ladino-speakers to mix with Sephardim of different origin is less marked in the capital cities (see Table 4).

Table 4: Comparison of Founders and Present Members According to Language and Location

Founders	Founders	Today: Arabic*	Today Arabic	Today: Ladino	Today Ladino	Today mixed	Today mixed
Capital	Province	Capital*	Province	Capital	Province	Capital	Province
Arabic 10	Arabic 2**	10					2
Ladino 9	Ladino 2			4		3	2
Mixed 1	Mixed 4	1				1	5
Total 20	8	11		4		4	9

* São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Miami were included among the capital cities.

** In Cordoba (Argentina) there were separate organizations of Jews from Syria and Turkey which merged in 1982.

The distinction between large urban centers and small communities adds the dimension of the size of the community as a central factor influencing resistance to “assimilation” among other Jewish groups. Seven of the organizations in our study have less than 100 members; eleven between 200 and 500, and two – close to 1,000 families. Five have between 750 and 1,600. The three largest ones are AISA (Asociación Israelita Sefaradí Argentina) – the communal organization of the Jews from Aleppo in Buenos Aires with 1,800 families; Alianza Monte Sinai of the Jews from Damascus in Mexico with 2,300 families; and Maguen David – of the Jews from Aleppo in Mexico with 2,600 families. There is an evident correlation between the size of the organization and the preservation of its original ethnic composition: large communal institutions belong to a specific group of origin, while the smaller ones are composed of different groups; in smaller communities, such as Montevideo, Bogota, and Lima, the tendency is towards the unity of all the Sephardim in one community. In the provincial towns in Argentina, there is a tendency to mix with Ashkenazim.

With the exception of one organization – Amigas sefardíes de NAAMAT – all twenty-five organizations fulfill a number of religious functions, which include a synagogue, a cemetery, religious education, and welfare. Eleven institutions – ten of them of Syrian and Moroccan origin – have a *mikvéh* (ritual bath), and in a few cases these organizations fulfill specific functions to assure the Orthodox continuity of the

younger generation, such as matchmaking, assistance for weddings, and in the case of AISA – a rabbi for the youth.

All the communal organizations reported conducting social activities for youth, adults, and elderly people, as well as social assistance for the needy. Less than half (eleven) maintain a Jewish school as part of their functions. These include the three large communal organizations of Mexico, six medium-sized communities, and two small ones. Seven are comprised of Arabic-speakers, two of Ladino-speakers, and two of mixed origin. The results seem to indicate that Arabic-speaking Jews have a greater tendency to provide Jewish education in frameworks that preserve ethnic continuity. The evidence, however, is too limited to draw conclusions without an analysis of the context of each community, with the alternatives of Jewish and non-Jewish schools (see Table 5)

**Table 5: Comparison between Number of Members, Origin, and Education
(Schools are marked with an asterisk)**

Number of members	Up to 100 families	101–500	500–1,000	1,000–2,600
Syria and Lebanon		2**	1*	3 **
Turkey and Balkans	1	1	1*	1*
Morocco	1	2*		
Mixed	4**	8*	1	2
Total	7	13	3	5
With school	2	4	2	3

The only institutions, apart from Amigas Sefardíes de Naamat, to mention Zionism among their activities were the Cuban Sephardic community in Miami and the Sephardic Community of Mexico, that throughout their history combined religious functions with Zionism. Most Sephardic communal organizations did not include political matters among their declared objectives, and have created different frameworks for Zionist activities. In another study I argue that in religious and social

spheres the Sephardic sector is divided along the communities of origin, while in the Zionist sphere they identify with the Sephardic Zionist movement, with no sub-ethnic divisions.²⁶

A few questions in the questionnaire were put to religious and lay functionaries. Very few women appear among the members of the boards of directors, and men are divided between professionals and businessmen. The most important function for which data was received is related to rabbis. Of the twenty-two rabbis included in this survey ten were born in Argentina; six of them were ordained in Israel, and four in Argentina. Another six were born in Morocco and ordained in Israel or England. In five communities the rabbis also fulfill the role of *hazan* and *mohel*, and another five communities do not have a rabbi. While the communities of origin have ceased to exist as a reservoir of spiritual leadership, the Latin American communities themselves become the resource for their young rabbis who complete their studies in Jerusalem.

Table 6: Rabbis

	Country of birth	Country of reception of <i>smicha</i> (ordination)
Argentina	10	2
Mexico	2	
Morocco	6	
Israel		13
England		2
United States		2
Turkey	1	
Brazil	1	
Uruguay	1	
France	1	

Conclusion

The contemporary Sephardic communities in Latin America were created by Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, most of whom emigrated to the continent between the 1890s and the end of the 1920s. During that period they established the

infrastructure for the institutional life of the Sephardim that was based on the model of the *kehilah* of the Old World. They combined religion with ethnicity by creating communal frameworks that united Jews from a common ethnic origin around the synagogue as the central institution.

During the four generations that have elapsed, new Sephardic organizations came into being, others were transformed, and functions were centralized to meet the evolving needs of their members and their social mobility. New waves of immigration invigorated ethnic identities, but integration into the social milieu increased trends of assimilation. The basic patterns of organization, however, seem to have remained unchanged. The Sephardic institutions form part of comprehensive religious frameworks that continue to be identified with the communities of origin of their founders in the 1920s.

The comparison between past and present and of Arabic-speakers vis-à-vis Ladino-speakers leads us to conclude that there is a correlation between religiosity and ethnic identity. The most Orthodox communities, of Syrian as well as of North African descent, are strongly identified with the town or city of provenance of their founders. Their particular ethnic identity within the Sephardic sector is an integral part of their religious heritage. The Ladino-speakers, more lax in their religious behavior, are more apt to intermingle with other Jewish groups; their Sephardic identity is regarded as a cultural heritage that is not essential for the preservation of their Jewish identity.

An important factor in the transmission of a particular ethnic identity is the size of the community. Large communal frameworks are essential not only for the provision of social and cultural needs but also to guarantee communal seclusion and endogamy. Other mechanisms of ethnic survival are based on links of exchange between communities of the same origin living in different countries, or through merging with communities of a similar origin.

A crucial factor in the transmission of religious/ethnic identity is the possibility to find or create a new rabbinical leadership that would be accepted as an authentic continuity with the cultural tradition of the communities of origin or as a relevant

source of inspiration and authority. Ladino-speaking communities become dependent on “imported” rabbis, while Arabic-speakers create a bridge between continuity and transition by sending locally born students to Sephardic rabbinical schools in Israel, fast becoming the substitute of the communities of origin as a source of identification.

By means of this study, still in a preliminary stage, I hope to draw the major contours of a jigsaw puzzle of today’s Sephardic diaspora in Latin America. Several monographic studies on individual communities will be needed to complete the picture.

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- ¹ *Proyecto de Estudios Sefardíes en América Latina*, Division of Latin America, Spain and Portugal, The Abraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Judaism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I would like to thank Prof. Haim Avni, Head of the Division, for his support and Mr. Sebastian Klor for his assistance in compilation of data.
- ² Margalit Bejarano, “Constitutional Documents of Jewish Sephardic Organizations in Latin America,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 8, no. 3–4 (Fall 1996): 129–34.
- ³ See, for example, the approach of Tzvi Schechner, “‘Kehile,’ Un concepto común heredado: La Creación de organizaciones comunitarias sobre la base de ‘Asociación de Entierro’ en el judaísmo ashkenazí de Buenos Aires y México, D.F.” in *Judaica Latinoamericana*, eds. AMILAT (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), 115–28.
- ⁴ Ignacio Klich and Jeffrey Lesser, *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America: Images and Realities* (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 1997), ix.
- ⁵ For a typology of Jewish identity, see Sergio DellaPergola, “Asimilación/continuidad judía: tres enfoques,” in *Encuentro y Alteridad: Vida y cultura judía en América Latina*, eds. Judit Bokser de Liwerant and Alicia Gojman de Backal (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1999), 467–85.
- ⁶ Simon N. Herman, *Israelis and Jews: The Continuity of an Identity* (New York: Random House, 1970), 14.
- ⁷ The term was borrowed from the title of the article by Saul Sosnowski, “Latin American-Jewish Writers: Protecting the Hyphen,” in *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, eds. Judith Laikin Elkin and Gilbert W. Merckx (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 297–307.
- ⁸ Rubel Iacov et. al., *Presencia Sefaradí en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Centro Educativo Sefaradí, 1992); Jacobo Smeke Darwich et al., *Historia de una Alianza* (Mexico: MSM, [ca. 2001]).

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- ⁹ See, for example, Joseph M. Papo, *Sephardim in Twentieth Century America: In Search of Unity* (San Jose and Berkeley, Calif.: Pele Yoetz Books and Judah L. Magnes Museum, 1987), 3–4.
- ¹⁰ Alvin E. Fidanque et al. *Kol Shearith Israel: A Hundred Years of Jewish Life in Panama* (Panama: Igmarr, 1977), 3–4. This is a bi-lingual publication, with Spanish and English in opposite columns.
- ¹¹ Nissim Elnecavé (Sefa'tah), *Los Hijos de Ibero-Franconia: Breviario del Mundo Sefaradí desde los orígenes hasta nuestros días* (Buenos Aires: La Luz, 1981), 22–23.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 14.
- ¹³ See the website of the Sephardi/Mizrahi Studies Caucus, www.princeton.edu/~rsimon/organizations.html; caucus@judnea.umass.edu.
- ¹⁴ Papo, *Sephardim*, 4.
- ¹⁵ On the history of the Jews in the Caribbeans see Isaac and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherland Antilles* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1970), 2 vols; Zvi Loker, *Jews in the Caribbean: Evidence on the History of the Jews in the Caribbean Zone in Colonial Times* (Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim, 1991); Mordechai Arbell, *The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean: The Spanish-Portuguese Jewish Settlement in the Caribbean and the Guianas*, (Jerusalem and New York: Gefen, 2002). On Panama, see: *Kol Shearith Israel*; Selly Dayán de Mizrahi and Nadhji Arjona, *La Saga de los sefarditas: del Medio Oriente a Panamá* (Panamá: Sociedad Israelita de Beneficencia Shevet Ahim, 1986).
- ¹⁶ Mordechai Arbell, *Comfortable Disappearance: Lessons from the Caribbean Jewish Experience* (Jerusalem: Institute of the World Jewish Congress, 1998), 25.
- ¹⁷ Victor A. Mirelman, “Sephardim in Latin America after Independence,” *American Jewish Archives* 44, no. 1 (Spring/ Summer 1992): 235–65.
- ¹⁸ Lily Blank, “The Integration of Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews in Venezuela through the Decision-Making Process in the Educational System,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 5, no. 3–4 (Fall 1993): 209–47.
- ¹⁹ On the Ladino-speakers see Victor A. Mirelman, “Sephardic Immigration to Argentina Prior to the Nazi Period,” in *The Jewish Presence in Latin America*, eds. Judith Laikin Elkin and Gilbert W. Merkx (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 13–32; Moshe Nes El (Arueste), *Historia de la Comunidad Sefaradí de Chile* (Santiago: Editorial Nascimento, 1984); Margalit Bejarano, “Sephardic Jews in Argentina” (Hebrew), *Bitfuzoth Hagolah* 85/86 (1978): 124–42; Rachel Mizrahi, *Imigrantes Judeus do Oriente Médio: São Paulo e o Rio de Janeiro*, São Paulo: Atelié Editorial, 2003.
- ²⁰ Liz Hamui de Halabe et. al., *Los judíos de Alepo en México* (México: Maguen David, 1989); Susana Brauner Rodgers, “The Jews of Aleppo in Buenos Aires, 1920–1960” (Hebrew), *Pe'amim* 80 (Summer 1999): 129–30; idem, “La comunidad judía alepina en Buenos Aires de la ortodoxia religiosa a la apertura y de la apertura a la ortodoxia religiosa (1930–1953),” *E.I.A.L.* 11, no. 1 (2000): 45–64.

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- ²¹ Dayán de Mizrahi and Arjona, *La Saga de los sefarditas*, 105.
- ²² Sergio DellaPergola and Susana Lerner, *La población judía de México: Perfil demográfico, social y cultural* (Mexico and Jerusalem: Asociación Mexicana de Amigos de la Universidad Hebrea de Jerusalén, 1995), 28.
- ²³ The list contains 41 organizations in Argentina, 12 in Brazil and the rest in other countries.
- ²⁴ Corrie MacLaggan, “Sephardi Jews in Latin America Plot to Keep Their Traditions Alive”, *JTA The Global News Service of the Jewish People*, February 9, 2004, <http://www.jta.org>.
- ²⁵ Sergio DellaPergola, “World Jewish Population”, *American Jewish Year Book 2003*, p. 600.
- ²⁶ Margalit Bejarano, “The Place of Sephardim in Latin American Jewish Communities – The Cases of Havana and Buenos Aires” (Hebrew), *Pe’amim* 76 (Summer 1998): 30–51.

Sephardim can visit Spain's network of Jewish-heritage sites and connect to Spain's Jewish communities without becoming Spanish citizens. Read: Trump is driving some American Jews to reclaim citizenship in Europe. But there is also a more prosaic reason so few Sephardim have applied for citizenship. For applicants young and old, Spanish citizenship is a symbolic bridge that connects past and present, a way to connect to their Sephardic roots. Marcelo Benveniste of Buenos Aires—who with his wife, Liliana, founded eSefarad, a network that reports on Sephardim throughout the world—told me, “I believe this a transcendent moment.”