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# The Sephardim in North America in the Twentieth Century

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## *Background*

Sephardi communal life in North America came into being at the turn of the twentieth century as a result of mass emigration from the Ottoman Empire, which had been the center of the Sephardi world since the end of the fifteenth century. Sephardim first settled in the vast Ottoman domain, comprising much of the Balkans, North Africa, and the Middle East, as a result of the expulsion from Spain in 1492 and, four years later, from Portugal. Some of the more than 100,000 Jews exiled from the Iberian Peninsula found new homes in Holland, England, Italy, and other parts of Western Europe, but the great majority of them sought refuge under Ottoman protection. Sultan Bayazid II, seeing the Jewish refugees as a valuable asset, ordered his imperial officials to receive them kindly, and is said to have exclaimed, "Ye call Ferdinand a wise king! He who is impoverishing his own country by expelling the Jews, and we are enriching ours by admitting them."

Jews, of course, had been living in the Eastern Mediterranean area from early times. During the Byzantine period they had been restricted in their choice of places of residence and had been banned from full participation in the life of the country. Under the sultanate, however, they obtained freedom of residence, unrestricted trade, and religious autonomy. One of the exiles from Spain, Joseph Nasi, became a favorite of Sultan Salim, who gifted him with a group of Mediterranean islands and bestowed upon him the title of Duke of Naxos.

The native Jews, who had initially kept aloof from the newcomers, found themselves drawn into their orbit, and gradually Judeo-Spanish became the prevalent language and Iberian customs came to merge with the native ones. Under Ottoman rule, all non-Muslims

were organized into national groups, or millets, and each millet was granted judicial autonomy, with its own court where conflicts and disputes were settled according to the laws of the respective minority group; moreover, the representative of each group to the Ottoman government was accorded the respect due an ambassador. The Jewish population enjoyed special respect and approval. Its chief rabbi, the hakham bashi, became an honored member of the Royal Council, able to represent and protect the interests of his people, as well as to exercise his authority over the life of the Jewish community. The last imperial investiture of a chief rabbi was conferred on Hai Nahoum Effendi in 1909.

It is relevant to future developments to note that the exiles did not congregate in a single area but settled, instead, in clusters of families hailing from the same province or township. Each settlement founded its own congregation and set up its own schools and courts, with each group faithfully preserving its own customs, characteristics, liturgy, and rituals. The various settlements soon began to prosper in many ways. The artisans among them had valuable knowledge and skills in the arts and crafts; the merchants, with their vast experience and extensive connections, contributed to the expansion of Turkish commerce and industry; and Sephardi physicians were highly regarded and enjoyed special respect, some serving as personal physicians to the court. Sephardi scientists, moreover, introduced the Turks to the use of gunpowder and the manufacture of firearms and cannon; they also installed Turkey's first printing press.<sup>1</sup>

Sephardi domestic life was organized around the observance of religious laws and precepts. Family roles were determined by tradition: the father was the head of the household and, as such, the voice of authority in all family affairs, but the mother was the ruler of her home. Customarily, young people married at an early age, with parents selecting the mates from among the children of their friends.

When the fortunes of the Ottoman Empire began to decline, Jewish prosperity began to wane as well. Thus, by the middle of the seventeenth century, only a small proportion of Ottoman Jews were still playing a significant role in commerce and high finance. Growing poverty, ignorance, and despair provided fertile ground for soothsayers and magicians promising cures for bodily ills and miraculous

interventions. These conditions provided a ready audience for the teachings of Sabbatai Zvi, the self-proclaimed Son of God and bridegroom of the Torah. His conversion to Islam disillusioned and chastened the masses, and caused them to abandon their folly.

The centuries-long downward curve of the Ottoman Empire, with its deleterious effects on all of Turkish life, left its imprint on the cultural and spiritual life of the Jewish community.<sup>2</sup> Children attended the yeshiva to the age of thirteen, those of wealthy parents continuing their education to the age of sixteen.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the Alliance Israélite Universelle had opened schools throughout the Ottoman Empire patterned after the French elementary school system. The Alliance was perceived by the Sephardim in a highly ambivalent way. On the one hand, so many parents wanted to enroll their children that classes were crowded beyond capacity. On the other hand, there was some quite strong opposition to the schools. The opponents argued that the schools, as centers of "proselytism," were alienating Sephardi children and youth from their ancient heritage. They also felt that the introduction of Gallicisms was despoiling the linguistic purity of Judeo-Spanish, and indeed that its status as the predominant language was being usurped by French.

In general, however, the schooling provided by the Alliance raised the educational level of the students and, thus, their economic potential. It helped thousands of young Sephardim to acquire not only the knowledge but the self-esteem, self-reliance, and dignity of demeanor required to enter professional or white-collar careers. In addition, the example of the educational system run by the Alliance inspired a number of Jewish communities to set up good, modern schools of their own for their children.<sup>3</sup>

The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 failed to live up to its promise of sweeping civic reform, but it did expand the civic rights of minorities, chief among them being the right and the duty to serve in the army. This carried with it the obligation of conforming to the Islamic laws observed in the army, which hitherto had been reserved for Muslims only. The imposition of military service led to the emigration of thousands of young Jews who did not wish to serve but could not come up with the high replacement tax which had to be paid dur-

ing each of the all-too-frequent mobilizations. An additional impetus toward emigration came from the dislocations and economic hardships suffered by the Jewish communities during the 1911 Turkish-Italian war, the Turkish-Balkan wars of 1912–1914, the outbreak of World War I, and a series of natural disasters such as fires, earthquakes, and epidemics which had been plaguing the crumbling Ottoman Empire.<sup>4</sup>

### *Arrival and Adaptation*

Some 3,413 Sephardi immigrants from the European and Asian parts of the Ottoman Empire arrived in the United States between 1885 and 1908. After 1908 Sephardi immigrants began to arrive in ever larger numbers, settling in the already overpopulated Lower East Side of New York, a factor which caused concern both to city officials and to the Commission of Immigration. In response to this concern, the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society, operating on funds supplied by Baron de Hirsch, organized the Industrial Removal Office (IRO) for the purpose of relocating immigrants to less-congested parts of the country. With the assistance of the Federation of Oriental Jews of America, many Sephardim were settled in Seattle, Rochester, New Jersey, Indianapolis, Gary, Montgomery, and Atlanta, while Judeo-Spanish immigrants were encouraged to reemigrate to Central and South America. The majority of the immigrants, however, remained in New York City.<sup>5</sup>

A study by the American Civic League in 1912 showed that most of the immigrants were poor and had only a minimal formal education, but that their literacy level compared favorably with that of other ethnic groups. Thus, two-fifths of the Sephardim could read and write their own language, and another fifth could read but not write. Ninety percent of the literate group could read the Hebrew prayerbook. This sorry state of affairs for the descendants of the highly cultured Sephardim of the Golden Age must, of course, be viewed in the light of the poverty and ignorance of the masses among whom the majority of the Sephardim lived in the old country.<sup>6</sup>

It is a well-established fact that immigrants to a new country start out by drawing together into groups from the same cities and town-

ships of origin, into landsmanshaften, such as were as formed by Ashkenazi immigrants. The Ashkenazim, however, had a unifying element which allowed them, in time, to transcend strictly local loyalties and expand into larger communal entities; they had a common language, Yiddish. The Sephardim from the Ottoman Empire, on the other hand, lacked a common language. Not only could they not communicate with the Ashkenazim but they were divided into Judeo-Spanish-, Arabic-, and Greek-speaking groups. They had to learn English in order to speak with each other. Furthermore, in the Ottoman Empire the Sephardic immigrants had lived in tightly knit, autonomous, and self-sufficient communal units, and it seemed only natural to them to continue this way of life in their new country.

Immigrants from the same city or locality formed societies in order to meet the immediate need of obtaining burial grounds for their dead. This done, societies expanded into serving other social and religious needs. They became the heartbeat of each Sephardi immigrant group and the center of its religious, cultural, and social activity. Mistrustful and fearful of all strangers, the Sephardi immigrants could feel secure only in their own enclaves and among their kinsmen. Some time passed before these small communities began to interact with each other and regain the consciousness of a shared Sephardi peoplehood.

The immigrant societies undoubtedly helped maintain the tradition, morale, sense of identity, and self-respect of their members. Yet they came to be a stumbling block to the formation of a centralized, effective Sephardi community. Thus, in considering the role of societies in the communal life of American Sephardim, a paraphrase of Rabbi Nissim Ovadia's dictum on the Alliance Israélite Universelle seems to sum it up best: The societies were so important to the initial survival and cohesion of the immigrant Sephardim that one cannot say anything bad about them, yet they proved so destructive to all efforts to unite and function on a broader, viable, communal Sephardi base, that one cannot say anything good about them.

The Arabic-speaking groups, which came mostly from Syria, stressed family unity and a thorough religious education for their children; the Greek Sephardim, mostly from Janina, maintained their individualism even within the framework of their own groups; while

the Judeo-Spanish-speaking Sephardim, by far the largest of the three groups, were spurred on by a desire to regain their historic status and assert their equality with Ashkenazi Jewry.<sup>7</sup> The Ashkenazim, however, had a hard time accepting as Jews people who spoke no Yiddish, preferred spicy food to gefilte fish and knishes, pronounced Hebrew words in a totally different way, and chanted the familiar prayers in an Oriental rather than a Slavic or Germanic tonality—in short, whose customs were utterly alien to them.

An example in case is the tale of two Sephardi immigrants who went to Seattle, where a Greek friend put them to work in his fish store. When he introduced his new helpers to his Jewish customers, the latter refused to accept them as coreligionists and insisted that they were Turkish impostors, even after the young immigrants produced their prayerbooks and tefillin. They were not accepted until the local Reform rabbi intervened, not only legitimizing their claim to be Jewish but impressing upon his congregation that Sephardim were the heirs of the Golden Age.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Sephardi immigrants who in their native countries had enjoyed the security and status engendered from being rooted in a community for generations now found themselves in double jeopardy, as it were—strangers in the vast, complex world that was America, and strangers to their fellow Jews, the Ashkenazim.

The Ashkenazim, of course, held no patent on snobbishness. Sephardim regarded their own history and cultural heritage as by far the nobler and bemoaned the current conditions which placed them at a disadvantage. These mutually unfriendly feelings led the leaders of both groups to look for ways of bringing about a rapprochement. The Sephardi paper *La América* ran a series of articles in Yiddish on Turkish history and the Sephardic way of life in the Ottoman Empire. *La América* also urged its Sephardi readers to attend Jewish (read Ashkenazi) and Zionist meetings and picnics, since this would enable Jews from Russia, Galicia, and Romania to meet their brethren from the Middle East.

The Yiddish press, in turn, published a series of interpretative articles on the Sephardi newcomers and appealed to the general Jewish community to help them achieve a more satisfactory economic and cultural adjustment. Yet, as social interaction slowly began to increase, especially among the young, both groups began to evidence

concern about their children marrying each other. Thus the May 1916 issue of the *American Jewish Chronicle* says rather plaintively: ". . . hardly does a daughter of the Orient marry a son of the West. She is given in marriage by her father, mother or guardian, who deem the Ashkenazi an unsuitable mate for a Sephardi woman, owing to differences of language, training and tradition."<sup>9</sup>

A study in 1969-70 by Hayyim Cohen of the Hebrew University shows that half of the third-generation Sephardi young men (especially among the Judeo-Spanish Sephardim) had married Ashkenazi women, while a survey by Marc Angel in 1972 shows that marriage between Ashkenazim and Sephardim has become quite common; "one might even say that it has become a rule rather than the exception."

The integration of Sephardim into the mainstream of American life was greatly speeded by America's entry into World War II. The erstwhile young immigrants were, by then, in their late forties and had assumed the responsibilities of raising and supporting families, and it was their children and grandchildren who responded to the draft. Full and partial responses by 272 Sephardi veterans show an average age of slightly over twenty on entering military service. Of the total, 243 were native-born, and 70 had enlisted. Their civilian occupations included salesmen (49), students (39), skilled workers (30), clerks (20), business owners (14), and manufacturers (6). Thirteen of the surveyed group had risen to officer rank, 74 had attained the grade of noncommissioned officer; among the awards received were presidential citations, Bronze Stars, good conduct medals, European, Asiatic, and Pacific Theatre medals, Victory Medals, Silver Stars, and the Croix de Guerre. The entire Sephardi community was mobilized to participate in the purchase of war bonds and to join the wartime work force. Sephardi political clubs, which had come into being before the war, intensified their activities. Thus, while not yet in a leadership position, the Sephardim still had the satisfaction of finding themselves an integral part of American economic and political life.<sup>10</sup>

### *Relations with the Established Sephardi Community*

The Sephardi immigrants understood that the Ashkenazi reaction to them was based on ignorance, but they were bewildered and hurt

when the old, established Sephardim did not accept them. The descendants of the twenty-three refugees who had landed in New Amsterdam from Brazil in 1654 knew well that the immigrants from the Ottoman Empire also had their ancestral roots in Spain, yet the affluent, educated, and well-respected American Sephardim found it difficult to receive the newcomers as members of their extended family. The manner in which they offered assistance made the immigrants feel that they were being relegated to the status of charity cases. The feelings of the newcomers were well expressed by Moïse Gadol, the publisher of *La América*:

We must now tell them [the earlier Sephardim] in all fairness, that not only have we stopped believing in their earlier promises, but that their claiming credit [for helping us] prevents us from being able to obtain the actual help from other sources. We shall no more allow them to aggrandize themselves in public at the expense of our honest and sincere people. We shall not permit them to assail our dignity by claiming credit for assistance which, in fact, they had not provided.<sup>11</sup>

The extent to which the earlier Sephardim were willing to go to preserve their status as the quintessential Sephardim is especially manifest in their tendency to refer to the immigrants as Levantine Jews and even more in the request made in 1914 by Dr. David de Sola Pool, rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City, that HIAS rename its Committee on Sephardic Jewish Immigrants the Committee on Oriental Jewish Immigrants (a request to which HIAS acquiesced). While "Oriental" and "Levantine" are purely geographic terms and as such unobjectionable, the immigrants experienced this labeling as a form of social denigration, especially since "Levantine," in American usage, had come to stand for shiftiness and shyster tactics. One immigrant penned the following verse which summed up the collective immigrant resentment:

We are but Jews  
and our name is Sephardim;  
never were we thought to be  
anything else but Sephardim  
from the day of our birth.

The term "Levantine" was quickly discarded, but "Oriental" remained in use for several years, since the established Sephardim could not see matters in the same light. Rabbi Marc Angel, himself the grandson of Sephardi immigrants, and current rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel, aptly sums up the then prevailing situation:

Some of the old line Sephardim felt uneasy because the new immigrants called themselves Sephardim. They were afraid the term would fall into disrepute and urged the new-comers to be called "Oriental." The immigrants, at first, accepted the new designation, but later came to resent it deeply as a slur against them. The impression had been created that the Sephardim were noble and rich while the Orientals were ignorant and poor. . . . The irony of it was that many of the immigrants were pure-blooded Spanish-speaking Sephardim who were being called "Orientals," while Shearith Israel members who were Ashkenazim and of mixed blood, were considered as the true Sephardim.<sup>12</sup>

While the leaders of both groups were grappling with the problem of identity, status, and recognition, the Congregation Shearith Israel sisterhood ignored abstract issues and welcomed the immigrants to its Neighborhood House on the Lower East Side, providing those who frequented it with a variety of services, including a synagogue (a departure from usual settlement-house procedure), religious education for the children, English day-classes, counseling on family and legal matters, a day nursery, a kindergarten, a dispensary, and a medical clinic. (Attendance at the Neighborhood House eventually dwindled as many Sephardic immigrants made sufficient economic progress to move to more desirable areas of residence, and the influx of newcomers fell off after 1924 because of restrictive new immigration laws. After four decades of dedicated work, the sisterhood finally closed the settlement in 1950.)<sup>13</sup>

The immigrants and the old Sephardim continued having difficulties with each other until the early 1920s, when both groups began making concerted efforts to develop a better mutual understanding and relationship. It was in this spirit of rapprochement that the leaders of Congregation Shearith Israel gave their active support to the Sephardic Jewish Community of New York, which had come into being in 1924. Henry S. Hendricks, the parnass (president) of Shearith Israel, served as the Community's treasurer and took part in its financial management, while Dr. Pool served as chairman of its education-

al committee. In 1926, another prominent member of Shearith Israel, Mrs. H. L. Toledano, organized the Community Ladies Auxiliary, the "Sephardith," and served as its president for several years. In 1928 Shearith Israel as a whole affiliated with the Community, stating: "This action of the Congregation puts the Community in the historic line of service to the Sephardim of New York, which Congregation Shearith Israel has shouldered alone for nearly two and three-quarters centuries."<sup>14</sup>

In the 1950s the Shearith Israel joined the Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America, in the "hope that our association will draw closer together all the Sephardi elements of this city, so that we may act with greater strength in furthering our holy and common tradition." The Central Community, in turn, participated in the celebration of Shearith Israel's tercentenary in 1957, initiating the project of establishing a Jewish National Fund Tamar and David de Sola Pool Nachla in Israel.

Another effective interaction was established by the close working relationship in the pursuit of shared concerns which evolved between the women's division of the Central Community and the sisterhood of the congregation. Even this drawing together of the two Sephardi groups, however, failed to bring about a realization of Dr. Pool's vision of Shearith Israel's becoming the "Cathedral Synagogue" of the entire Sephardi community. The children and grandchildren of the twentieth-century Sephardi immigrants have established beautiful synagogues of their own throughout the country. A few well-to-do among them are affiliated with Shearith Israel, while others use it services only on special occasions. But the women's division and other groups hold meetings and social affairs in the Shearith Israel auditorium, and at such times Sephardi songs from various countries, the rhythm of Middle Eastern dancing, and the aroma of Sephardi cooking fill the synagogue's social hall, testifying to the many facets of the Sephardi heritage.<sup>15</sup>

### *Economic Adjustment*

The economic fortunes of the Sephardi immigrants changed profoundly from one generation to the next. Enterprising Sephardim

attending the New Orleans Centennial Exposition in 1885 and the Louisiana Purchase Centennial Exposition in St. Louis in 1904 found that they had indeed come to the land of opportunity. They managed, within a few years time, to become successful businessmen. Trade connections with the Orient enabled them to establish lucrative rug and antique businesses, while a few others built up a large amusement and recreation industry. The Schinasi brothers, having found an encouraging response to their hand-rolled Turkish cigarettes, proceeded to build a plant with cigarette rolling and packaging equipment designed to their specifications to handle rice and bamboo paper imported from Egypt and tobacco from Turkey.

The situation began to change after 1908, however, when increasing numbers of immigrants began to arrive, most of whom lacked both formal education and vocational skills and could speak neither English nor Yiddish. Many had to eke out a living by peddling, shining shoes, or selling postcards and flowers. Some found work as janitors or as candy and ice-cream vendors in movie houses or as checkroom attendants in hotels. Still others were hired by electrical and phonographic plants, garment factories, and tailoring shops—working long hours under unsanitary conditions for low pay. Taking in boarders was also a frequent means of supplementing one's income.<sup>16</sup>

It was estimated in 1916 that 10 percent of the immigrants were women, both married and single, and about half of them were employed, for the most part as unskilled workers. Married women mostly did piecework in their own crowded living quarters on material furnished by Sephardi subcontractors, earning a mere pittance. As for the women working outside the home, some of them were employed in small factories and shops run by their kinsmen, earning pitifully low wages and, in most cases, being required to pay for the use of the sewing machines on which they worked.

Sweatshop conditions, of course, were not invented by Sephardi entrepreneurs; they had long been part of the American immigrant scene. The Sephardi press and civic leaders strenuously advocated joining labor unions, but most Sephardi workers seemed to prefer security and low pay to the exertion and discomfort of union membership. In their view, being in a union meant having to associate with people whose language they did not speak, whose social mores

seemed alien, and whom they did not trust. An editorial in *La Vara* in May 1923 mournfully depicted Sephardi workers as “sweating blood at their machines” rather than joining their comrades in the struggle for better working conditions.<sup>17</sup>

In the course of the 1920s the Sephardi needle-trade industry expanded from the exclusive manufacture of skirts and kimonos to include sportswear, women’s coats and dresses, and children’s clothing. With business improving and extending, working conditions began to change for the better. But the 1929 crash wiped out all the improvements along with the profits, and the fight for survival drove many of the manufacturers, both Ashkenazi and Sephardi, back to operating on a sweatshop level, fighting both unions and gangsterism. This state of affairs continued until the 1933 National Recovery Act permitted both the industry and the unions to recoup and start all over again.<sup>18</sup>

The gradual absorption of the Sephardim into general American economic life is reflected in two surveys which, although limited in scope, indicate the prevailing trend of their economic adjustment. In 1938 the largest society, the Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America, polled its membership, composed primarily of first-generation immigrants, and found the greatest number of respondents engaged in unskilled and semi-skilled labor in forty-three occupational categories, with 16 percent owning their own businesses and only a handful having reached professional status. A 1972 survey of second- and third-generation Sephardim by Rabbi Marc Angel, however, shows only a minuscule percentage of those polled falling into the category of unskilled labor, and they were in the age-range of forty and over. In the under-forty age-group, 53 percent were in business, 39 percent were professionals, 5 percent were artists, and 3 percent were skilled laborers.<sup>19</sup>

Looking back at the struggles and hardships the masses of Sephardi immigrants had to undergo (in common with most immigrants), and looking at the economic status of their children and grandchildren, one must acknowledge that they achieved what they set out to do when they left their homes to face the rigors of life in a new country—they ensured a better future for their offspring. Higher education is today considered an essential part of life by the descendants of

the immigrants and of the refugees who arrived on these shores after World War II. They are to be found in all the professions. The fields of Romance languages and history are favored by those going into university teaching.

For the Sephardi immigrant, as for American Jewry as a whole, the decade of the 1940s constituted a watershed. Their wartime service and the general trend of the postwar period steered Sephardi youth toward greater integration into American life. Before World War II Sephardi manufacturers had survived by concentrating on high volumes at marginal profits. This effort stood them in good stead during the war, when the Office of Price Administration based its purchasing quota of raw materials on the applicant's previous volume of trade. This enabled many Sephardi manufacturers to fill a tremendous number of orders, bringing great wealth to several, with a few of them reaching the point of being listed on the stock market.

Several Sephardi manufacturers came to assume leadership in the garment industry. Three former presidents of the Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America served as presidents of the National Skirt and Sportswear Association, the Popular Dress Manufacturing Association, and the Federation of Apparel Manufacture Association, respectively.

The garment industry was one of the most important contributors to Sephardic economic development, but it was by no means the only one. A number of Sephardim went into the manufacture of yogurt, ice-cream cones, candy and halvah, and *lekum lehat*. Others entered the import-export industry, acquiring prestigious stores of their own; still others, more recently, engaged in electronics and banking.

### *Religion*

While Sephardim and Ashkenazim are united in observing the basic tenets of Judaism and in abiding by the authority of the Babylonian Talmud, their divergent cultural backgrounds and historical experiences have left an imprint on their rituals, liturgy, and general attitude toward Jewish law. Sephardim have tended to stress the joyful and sustaining aspects of observing the commandments, and their strong sense of shared tradition and peoplehood enables them to tol-

erate patterns of observance that are less than absolute. Sephardi music reflects Iberian and Arabic elements; in consequence, the musical range of Sephardi chants is limited, and thus the congregation is able to join with the cantor in the recital and chanting of the prayers. As for the *piyutim* (hymns), it has been said that the Ashkenazi ones are "mediators between the Nation and its God," while those of the Sephardim are "mediators between the Soul and its Creator." Sephardi *piyutim* are derived from the poets of the Golden Age, such as Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Judah Halevi, Abravanel, Abraham Ibn Ezra, and many others.

Thoughtful Sephardim have been concerned about preserving Sephardi religious rituals and traditions since the early years of mass immigration, which produced a proliferation of small, societal synagogues. While the birth of each new synagogue served as an occasion for neighborhood celebrations marked by so much religious fervor that their Ashkenazi neighbors took to referring to the Sephardim as "Jews of Jerusalem," the synagogues proved too small to accommodate everyone who wanted to worship on the High Holidays, so that services on these occasions had to be held in movie houses, lofts, and halls, losing out on both proper conduct and decorum.

In 1913, a commission set up by concerned leaders of the Federation of Oriental Jews, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, and the Kehillah of New York attempted to bring a measure of unity into the spiritual life of the Sephardim. The idea of setting up a chief rabbinate, with Rabbi Abraham Galante of Turkey as incumbent, was proposed but failed to gain a consensus among the commission's members. Deliberations continued until the outbreak of World War I made it impossible for Rabbi Galante to leave Turkey.<sup>20</sup>

Matters stood still until 1941, when Rabbi Nissim J. Ovadia arrived in this country as a refugee from France. The force of his magnetic personality and the strength of his leadership drew all the societies of the three Sephardi groups into his ambit, and they agreed to unite into the Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America, electing him as their chief rabbi—a position he filled for a tragically short time until his death the following year. He was succeeded as chief rabbi by Dr. Isaac Alcalay, a refugee from Yugoslavia, who served in this capacity until his retirement in 1968. As one of his responsibilities,

Rabbi Alcalay served as a consultant to the Bet Din which the immigrants had established in 1920. Upon his retirement this Bet Din ceased its activity, leaving as the only Sephardi Bet Din extant today the one maintained by the Syrian Sephardi community.<sup>21</sup>

As demographic changes brought on by economic improvement served to loosen societal ties, congregations began to form on an inclusive neighborhood basis, recognizing a common Sephardi heritage which transcends regional roots. Newly arriving immigrants from North Africa, Iran, Iraq, and Cuba, however, still sought the security and comfort of forming their own congregations.

Thoughtful Sephardim had recognized early on that what Sephardi synagogues needed, in addition to the spiritual leadership exerted by a chief rabbi, was to obtain trained Sephardi rabbis, able to preserve and pass on Sephardi religious rituals and traditions as well as to exercise the kind of communal leadership needed in the environment into which they all had been transplanted. In 1956, the Central Sephardic Jewish Community, aware of the dire shortage of trained Sephardi rabbis, asked Yeshiva University to initiate a program of Sephardi studies, with the focus on rabbinical training. Matters did not begin to move, however, until 1964, when the chief rabbi of Great Britain, Dr. Solomon Gaon, joined the Yeshiva faculty; under his aegis the Sephardic Studies Program (now the Jacob Safra Institute of Sephardic Studies) came into being.<sup>22</sup>

A survey by the American Sephardi Federation in 1975 showed that half of the forty-six Sephardi congregations were headed by Sephardi rabbis, one-third by Ashkenazim, and the rest were without a rabbi. The 1989–90 Diary of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation indicates that out of sixty-nine congregations, over two-thirds are headed by Sephardi rabbis, 19 percent by Ashkenazim, and an equal number have no rabbis, showing that the number of Sephardi congregations is growing and that they are increasingly being served by Sephardi rabbis.

### *Education*

Much like the question of religious observance and synagogue life, Jewish education for the young—a matter of course in the Ottoman

Empire—was a problem for the Sephardi immigrants. Societal fragmentation was the main roadblock. Because the societies were made up of relatively small, tightly knit groups, and were reluctant to join forces with each other, they were unable to provide their members with many needed services, and especially with adequate religious schools for their children.

When *La América* urged its readers to send their children to Ashkenazi neighborhood Talmud Torahs, some of the societies were stirred into opening schools of their own where their children would learn “our Hebrew language, our religion and the glorious history of our ancient great nation.” By 1912 there were two schools on the Lower East Side and one in Harlem, the latter receiving an accolade from the *Jewish Daily Forward* for its achievements.

Unfortunately, the schools were plagued by lack of funds, and this made it difficult for them to accommodate new pupils and maintain a level of excellence. Only the Syrian community mustered the required resources to maintain steadily growing schools. In the late 1920s the Sephardi Jewish Community of New York tried to consolidate the various downtown societal schools into one well-functioning institution, but the effort was unsuccessful.<sup>23</sup>

The next major communal push to safeguard the Sephardi heritage through improved Jewish education came from the Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America, which not only subventioned some of the existing schools but was able to consolidate several in Brooklyn and the Bronx. This accomplishment was hailed by knowledgeable leaders as “the turning point in the evolution of the Community from a hope and a wish into a fact and reality.”

Nonetheless, the number of children attending these schools was very small. A survey conducted by the Central Sephardic Community in 1946 in the Metropolitan New York area showed that only 643 children were attending Sephardi schools. The next two decades produced some progress, albeit limited. A 1963 survey showed that the number of religious schools had increased from five to eight and the number of students had almost doubled, with an enrollment of 1,083 students, 950 of whom were attending schools sponsored by the Brooklyn Syrian Sephardi community. The survey also indicated that

an indeterminate number of Sephardi families were sending their children to Ashkenazi-sponsored schools and yeshivot.

In 1976, a study conducted by Rabbi Abraham Hecht, chairman of the Education Committee of the American Sephardi Federation, found that very little progress has been made in the endeavor to increase the number of students and provide them with an adequate religious education. The only positive development registered in the study was the fact that a number of Ashkenazi schools had successfully introduced Sephardi history and culture into their curricula.<sup>24</sup> To date, all Sephardi religious schools are maintained by Sephardi congregations, with the exception of a few all-day schools and a growing number of schools sponsored by the Syrian Sephardi communities, which have maintained religious education as an integral part of their communal life.

### Culture

While integration into the prevailing culture was a necessary part of the immigrants' economic progress and social adjustment, Sephardi intellectuals early on became concerned that this might bring in its train a sense of unrootedness and alienation. In 1930 a "lest we forget our glorious heritage" campaign was launched, and the sponsorship of Columbia University was elicited for the creation of a Sephardic Studies Group, directed by Professor Mair J. Benardete and Henry J. Besso. The Group published Besso's *The Dramatic Literature of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam, Holland in the 17th Century* and Benardete's *Study of the Hispanic Culture and Heritage of the Sephardic Jews*, published in 1951. This done, however, the Group dissolved for lack of further interest and support.

The Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America, in turn, successfully sponsored a scholarship program in 1959, aimed at encouraging Sephardi students to complete their general academic education as well as their religious studies. It also launched an essay contest on Sephardi life in the United States, but this effort evoked only scant interest. The Community subsequently encouraged Yeshiva University to establish the Jacob E. Safra Institute of Sephardic Studies. Yeshiva also opened a Sephardic Reference Room containing

manuscripts, books, periodicals, and artifacts and holds lectures and exhibits on Sephardi culture.<sup>25</sup>

The 1960s saw a burgeoning of cultural activity. Reproached by historian David N. Barocas for the shameful neglect of living Sephardi scholars, a group of Sephardi intellectuals bestirred themselves to organize the Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, headed by Professor Mair Benardete and, subsequently, by Louis N. Levy. The Foundation published "tracts" containing a wealth of data on the background of Sephardi immigrants gathered over the years, which were shared with scholars throughout the country. Upon Barocas's death, the objectives of the Foundation were integrated into the program of the Sephardic House established by Rabbi Marc Angel and Louis N. Levy, an Institute for Researching and Promoting Sephardic History and Culture. Directed by Rabbi Angel, the Sephardic House offers classes and programs of Sephardi interest, is preparing educational materials on Sephardi history and culture to be used in Jewish schools, and publishes books by Sephardi authors. In 1992 it sponsored its second annual contest for college youths. It also issues a newsletter that goes out to its members and to Sephardi congregations throughout the country.

In 1967, Professor Isaac Jack Lévy at the University of South Carolina, with the sponsorship of Yeshiva University, organized the American Society for Sephardic Studies (ASOSS). Its publication, the *Sephardic Scholar*, provided a forum for young scholars, and their articles, in turn, provided valuable material for present-day researchers. Yet the funds for this publication ran out after four issues, and the financial and moral support needed to revive it have failed to materialize. At present, according to its current president, David J. Altabé, the ASOSS continues a merely nominal existence, in the hope, however, that a new wave of interest and support might bring it back to life.

The Institute for Sephardic studies, organized by Professor José Faur in 1972, had the especially promising focus of developing a cadre of young leaders with a mandate to actively participate in communal life and work on making cultural programs part and parcel of Sephardi communal and family events. The Institute also introduced credit-earning Sephardi studies programs in a number of universities and awarded scholarships for doctoral degrees in religion, history,

and Sephardi studies. Unfortunately, this truly effective, progressive program came to an end when Institute's leaders were unable to resolve some basic disagreements about future goals and objectives.

Yeshiva University is, at present, the nation's only academy to offer a Sephardic major leading to a B.A. or B.S. degree, but several universities offer courses on Sephardi Judaism, its history, culture, and folklore, and a number of Sephardi, Ashkenazi, and non-Jewish academics are engaged in research in this field.<sup>26</sup>

### *Zionism*

Throughout their long sojourn in the Ottoman Empire, Sephardim had been constrained to express their Zionist aspirations only in prayers and on Passover, since political Zionism was considered an irredentist movement in Turkey. It took a few years for the immigrants to absorb the fact that in America people were free to express their ideas and to join together to promote their beliefs, and that it was okay to be an active Zionist.

In 1913 the Oriental Jewish Maccabee Society was formed in order to "develop the physical well being of its membership, to propagate the Hebrew language, to defend the national honor of the Jew whenever attacked and to work closely with the Federation of American Zionists." The immigrants, however, were not as yet ready for sustained organizational work and the group folded after a few months.

A similar fate overtook the Zionist Sephardic Society, founded in July 1914 by Moïse Gadol. Even though its first open meeting was attended by more than 400 people, among them many Ashkenazim, and notwithstanding its participation in Jewish National Fund drives, affiliation with the Federation of American Zionists, and participation in Prayers for Peace meetings called by President Woodrow Wilson, the Society was unable to maintain its cohesion, and by the end of 1915 it had ceased to exist.

Undeterred by these failures the Agudath Zionist Maccabee came into being in 1916. Under the leadership of Simon Nessim, it enriched and expanded the traditional Maccabee program to include courses in Jewish history and culture. It also took an active part in raising funds for the Jewish National Fund and the Jewish Colonial Trust.

Several young Sephardi women joined the society, a sufficiently unusual occurrence in those days to attract considerable attention, prompting a delighted Nissim Behar, a revered Sephardi luminary, to assert gallantly that "a society without young women is like a spring without roses." Its publication, *La Renanciencia* ("Renaissance") began in March 1917 as a bimonthly, continued through 1918, and then appeared irregularly until 1922.<sup>27</sup>

The issuance of the Balfour Declaration on November 2, 1917, evoked a resurgence of enthusiasm among the Sephardi community. Judeo-Spanish-, Greek-, and Arabic-speaking groups held mass meetings expressing support for a Jewish National Home in Palestine and participated in fund-raising activities on behalf of Zionist projects. There were, however, some who feared giving overt support to the establishment of a Jewish homeland lest it lead to reprisals against the Jews of Turkey. Sephardi socialists were also opposed, disagreeing with the Zionist credo on ideological grounds, but they were a very small minority. The main contributing factor in the demise of the Agudath Maccabee Society in the late 1920s was the dispersal of its members into outlying neighborhoods, though Simon Nessim held that an important role was also played by the fatalism which many Sephardim had absorbed during their sojourn in the Ottoman Empire, a feeling that individual activity and initiative are irrelevant and futile.

Ideological conflicts, psychological conditioning, and demographic changes notwithstanding, Sephardim did not lose the desire to express their Zionist aspirations as Sephardim. In 1937 a number of former Agudath Zionist Maccabee members obtained a partial subvention from the Zionist Organization of America (ZOA) and launched the *Sephardic Bulletin*, devoting space to Zionism and world Jewish affairs, and responding to those who were averse to taking a strong Zionist stand by citing the splendid wartime record of the young Sephardim in the Jewish Battalion who had fought for the liberation of Palestine.

The anti-Zionist voice gradually grew weaker, and in 1942 *La Vara* was able to declare editorially that Zionism had ceased to be a subject of debate among the Sephardim, everyone having recognized its vital importance. In 1943 a group of young Syrian Sephardim formed the

Syrian Division of the ZOA, but subsequently they joined the Mizrahi. Thirty years later a group of Syrian women organized a chapter of the Mizrahi Women's Organization of America.<sup>28</sup>

Sephardim, as a collective entity, have, of course, always strongly supported the concept of a Jewish national homeland. The history of Sephardi settlements in Palestine, going back to the eleventh century, and of the many nineteenth-century Sephardi forerunners of latter-day Zionism, was recounted in 1947 in a joint supportive statement to the United Nations Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question by the Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America, the American Branch of the Sephardi World Federation, and the Union of Sephardic Congregations. At its reorganization conclave in 1972, the American Sephardic Federation affiliated with the American Zionist Federation.

### *The Press*

The desire to unite the fragmented Sephardi immigrant groups into a pursuit of common objectives led Moïse Gadol, while visiting from Bulgaria in 1910, to decide to stay in New York in order to publish a Judeo-Spanish newspaper. *La América*, and the publications that followed, became the life-blood of the immigrant community, providing its members with much-needed information, serving as a means of intercommunication, extending leadership, and formulating communal goals.

Judeo-Spanish, or Ladino, has its base in the pre-classical, pre-Columbian fifteenth-century Castilian Spanish that was the spoken language of the Jews in Spain until the Edict of Expulsion in 1492, since Hebrew was reserved for scholarly treatises, philosophy, and poetry. Having no formally codified structure, Judeo-Spanish remained flexible and adaptable to the postexilic needs of the Sephardim and integrated many of the grammatical rules of their respective host-countries. It is written in cursive Rashi characters.

Having sunk all of his capital of \$880 into this venture, Moïse Gadol published the first issue of *La América* in November 1910. Its stated objectives were

to play a most sacred, the most holy role in helping our brethren to unite into a community, and to serve as medium of all important events, as well as an organ representing their rights and, finally, to raise its humble but strong voice to put an end to the injustice and antagonism existing between the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim.

Publishing English, Yiddish, and Judeo-Spanish glossaries (with the English transliterated into Rashi characters), *La América* strove to acquaint the immigrants with the immigration laws, urged them to obtain citizenship papers, and offered help on such practical matters as the amount of tax levied on pushcart peddlers, the location of neighborhood hospitals, pharmacies, and public baths, and the cost of riding subways, streetcars, and elevated trains, where "there are no divided sections, the poor and the millionaires sit together."

The articles also dealt with mandatory school attendance for all children under sixteen, free access to libraries, museums, and parks, and even the low cost of electricity, "cheaper than anywhere in the world." Subsequent Sephardi publications followed *La América's* example of providing English vocabulary columns, publishing biographical sketches of American historical figures, and urging readers to avail themselves of the help HIAS was offering immigrants in securing first papers.

The post-World War I economic depression, the near cessation of Sephardi immigration, and last but not least, the competition posed by other Sephardi papers, chiefly *La Vara*, combined to endanger not only the expansion but the very existence of *La América*. Gadol fought hard to keep his paper alive but had to admit defeat by July of 1925.<sup>29</sup>

An overview of the publications which followed, one after the other, in rapid succession testifies to the ease with which the interest of the Sephardi immigrants could be aroused as well as to the difficulty in maintaining it for very long. The most short-lived of the papers was *La Aguila* ("The Eagle"), launched by Alfred Mizrahi in February 1912 on the assumption that his drive to sell one thousand \$5 shares would provide the necessary funds to publish a daily newspaper. His assumption, however, proved wrong, and the first of issue of *La Aguila* was also its last.

*El Progreso*, which appeared in October 1915 and changed its name to *La Bos del Pueblo* in its December issue, was started by the

Nessim-Torres Press "as a weekly journal of pleasure and enlightenment, devoted to the intellects of the Sephardic Jews in America." Its Salonika-born chief editor, Maurice Nessim, had been an active member of the Salonika Socialist Federation, and after America's entry into World War I, his editorials began to alarm the government censors, who interpreted them as communist propaganda, a state of affairs which induced Nessim to leave the country in 1919.

Undeterred by his earlier failure, Alfred Mizrahi decided to take over the paper and renamed it *La Epoca de New York*, adding English sections of general interest in order to attract not only Ashkenazi but non-Jewish readers. But this venture proved to be ill-starred as well, closing down in February 1920.

*El Kirbatch Americano* ("The American Whip"), a humorous weekly with a satirical bite, edited by Albert Levy, appeared in 1917 and closed down that same year. So did Albert Covo's *El Emigrante*, designed to improve the immigrants' social and moral conditions.<sup>30</sup>

The first postwar attempt to start a new publication came in September of 1921, when Simon S. Nessim began putting out the weekly *La Luz*, dedicated to bringing about better mutual understanding among the various Sephardi groups and to raising their educational and cultural level. For lack of sufficient communal support *La Luz* folded in 1922.

At the very time that one Sephardi publication was failing, another was starting what was to be an uninterrupted run of twenty-six years. *La Vara* ("The Staff") made its appearance in September 1922, with a masthead depicting an angel beating a hypocrite with a staff. The motto above this, printed in both Judeo-Spanish and Hebrew, proclaimed: "And the staff you shall take in your hand and shall not leave a hypocrite among you."

In 1923 *La Vara* passed into the hands of the Nessim-Torres Press, and a few years later Albert Torres became its sole owner and editor. Throughout its life *La Vara* was a strong supporter of every effort to form a central community organization. In the early 1930s, it dropped its humor pages to focus on world affairs and on the promotion of good communal leadership, also adding an English-language section. Due to Albert Torres's ill-health and ensuing financial problems, the very last

Judeo-Spanish paper to be printed in Hebrew characters, not only in America but in the entire world, came to an end in February 1948.

Two more publications form a part of the annals of the Sephardi press in North America. *El Luzero* ("The Beacon"), a monthly illustrated review, first saw the light of day in 1927 and was forced to close a year later because of insufficient interest. And *Progress*, an English-language monthly which began publishing in Seattle in September 1934 and was distributed free of charge to all of the city's Sephardi households, expired with its thirteenth issue.<sup>31</sup>

The *Sephardic Home News*, primarily an organ of the Sephardic Home for the Aged, appears ten times a year. An eight-page publication dealing mostly with events concerning the Home, it has a wide circulation throughout the country and, in most issues, carries articles of a cultural nature and news of general Jewish interest.

The *Sephardic View International*, published by Ruth Abade, is an organ of the International Sephardic Exchange, a nonprofit organization, which appears irregularly with news and views from Sephardi communities all over the world.

### *Community Organization*

Communal organizations owe their inception to the realization that basic needs can be met most constructively by mutual cooperation and assistance. Sephardi immigrants, coming into a totally new and alien environment, naturally gravitated to people from their home regions, deriving comfort from shared language and customs. Once established, the mutual-aid societies became the centers of communal and social life, with all the strengths and weaknesses that such small, closed-in social units tend to possess.

The situation might have continued unchanged throughout the adjustment process were it not for the inner strength derived from the feeling of being part of *Klal Yisrael*, the totality of the Jewish people, that the Sephardim had developed during the era of dispersion. Thus, having achieved an initial economic adjustment, Sephardi civic leaders began to examine the total Sephardi cultural inheritance, reaffirming Sephardi values, rituals, and traditions and transmitting them to the young.

The best way to do this, they found, was by uniting their many disparate synagogues and obtaining the services of trained rabbis, by providing good schools with qualified teachers, and by establishing coordinated welfare agencies. The inability of the individual societies to provide programs of this kind to their members and to unaffiliated Sephardim served as a prod to civic leaders and the press, and they repeatedly urged the societies to join forces in order to build a comprehensive, strong communal organization.

In the event, it was an appeal for help for the victims of the devastating 1910 fire in Constantinople (Istanbul) which brought about the first joint action by the societies. The subsequent influx of thousands of immigrants from Turkey, the Balkans, and the Near East gave further impetus to the twelve Judeo-Spanish-, Arabic-, and Greek-speaking societies then in existence to form an agency that would represent the total community, without, however, impinging on individual societal rights.

In April 1912, the concerted leadership of Moïse Gadol, Joseph Gedalecia, and Albert Amateau resulted in the formation of the Federation of Oriental Jews of America (the word "Oriental" having been strongly suggested by the leadership of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue), with an advisory board that included prominent Ashkenazi personalities and members of Shearith Israel as well as some prominent Sephardim. Joseph Gedalecia was elected president of the Federation, which cited among its objectives

to Americanize the Spanish, Greek and Arabic speaking Jews from the Orient whose influx, of late, has increased considerably . . . to engender and promote a feeling of unity and love among the members thereof and to extend voluntarily a helping hand in time of need to one another and to other Jews from the Orient and also to have a common place where the members shall gather from time to time to discuss charitable, social and educational matters.<sup>27</sup>

Following the initial enthusiastic affirmation of cooperation and proud Sephardi self-reliance came the realization that if the Federation was to achieve this goal, the individual societies had to commit themselves to active participation and ongoing financial support. The knowledge that concerted action was in the best interest of the whole Sephardi community prevented societal leaders from arguing against

it, but their reluctance to abandon their deeply rooted *modi operandi* pushed them into a stance of passive resistance, as it were. They manifested their resistance by dilly-dallying on submitting their financial contributions and by a merely sporadic attendance at meetings.<sup>33</sup>

Yet some of the Federation's efforts did meet with success. It brought to the attention of the general Jewish community the suffering of the Jews during the Balkan Wars, resulting in the formation of a community-wide Committee for the Relief of Jewish Sufferers by Wars and Massacre. Volunteers came forth to provide the newly arrived immigrants with advice and referrals to various hospitals and Jewish charitable and recreational institutions. The Federation also provided the leaders of the societies, who previously had been isolated from each other, with opportunities to meet and get acquainted, with the additional benefit of learning how to conduct orderly meetings according to parliamentary rules.<sup>34</sup>

The Federation's leaders wanted to increase its effectiveness by opening an office with a paid secretary, installing a chief rabbi, and most of all, acquiring a building which would house a centralized synagogue and a Talmud Torah. But these goals proved unattainable even with the financial aid offered by the Kehillah of New York. When the United States entered World War I in April 1917, the Federation suspended its activities in order not to appear to be operating illegally, since most of the not yet naturalized Jews from Turkey were, technically, subjects of an enemy nation. After the war, due to lack of manpower and funds, and most importantly because of the indifference of its member societies, the Federation was unable to regain whatever momentum it had been able to develop. It went out of existence in 1918.<sup>35</sup>

The next successful move toward communal unity and cohesion came, surprisingly enough, from within the societies themselves, instigated by the Salnician Brotherhood. Thirteen Judeo-Spanish-speaking societies responded to the call, and in January 1920, the Sephardic Community of New York was founded, with Joseph A. de Benyunes as president. Its objectives included the centralization of religious services and Jewish education, settling of domestic problems, fund-raising for war victims, and last but not least, becoming an authorized and effective representative of the Sephardi communi-

ty in all dealings with other Jewish institutions and with the government, thus enabling Sephardim to enjoy the same recognition and privileges as their Ashkenazi brethren.

The Community was given office space in the Spanish and Portuguese Sisterhood Neighborhood House. Its part-time executive secretary dealt with problems pertaining to immigration, obtained work permits, and assisted in filing for citizenship papers; he also worked with the State Board of Charities and the United Hebrew Charities, and settled domestic quarrels—all highly valued services at no cost to the recipients.

Impressed with the work done by the Community, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue considered joining on an equal basis with the societies but withheld a final commitment until it could be sure that the leaders of the societies truly wanted the Community to exist and were ready to work with it and for it. This skepticism, alas, proved to be well grounded, and even the rousing encouragement of Chief Rabbi Nahum Effendi of Egypt, visiting in New York, failed to counteract the lack of interest displayed by the societies. The lack of financial and moral support made it impossible to maintain the services of the part-time executive secretary, and this, in turn, brought about the demise of the Community in the spring of 1922.<sup>36</sup>

Social and political entities, like nature, abhor a vacuum; thus, no sooner had the Sephardic Community of New York ceased to exist than signs of a new surge of interest and sentiment toward achieving communal integration and cohesion began to appear in the Sephardi press. By the early 1920s the struggle for economic survival had become largely a thing of the past for most Sephardi immigrants. The thrust now came from the desire to foster the health and development of Sephardim as a group, as bearers of a distinct and proud Jewish tradition and history of their own who were ready to take their rightful place in the life of their new country.

In June of 1924, seven societies, with a combined membership of 1,600 and annual dues of \$2 per member, affiliated into the Sephardic Jewish Community of New York, with the following objectives:

To promote the general welfare of the Sephardic Jewish community of New York and other cities in the United States and to perpetuate the ideals and traditions of the Sephardic people; to cooperate with existing Sephardic organiza-

tions; to promote the organization of societies to take charge of specific lines of communal activity and to help every individual member of the Community to avail himself of such advantages and facilities as are already available.

Membership, open to all Jews, was divided into five categories: societies, groups, philanthropic organizations, patrons, and individuals at large.<sup>37</sup> Edward Valensi was the first elected president; Robert Franco served as executive secretary and upon his death was succeeded by Victor Tarry.

Over the next few years the Community raised the level of social and educational services, coordinated fund-raising activities, achieved a degree of communal unity, and acted as the official representative of America Sephardim for overseas Sephardi communities. Most importantly, it was able to realize a long-cherished dream by purchasing a building in Harlem. Housing an enlarged synagogue and a Talmud Torah, and able to accommodate a great many youth and adult activities, the Community's new home was a true center of Sephardi cultural and communal life.

Despite this most promising beginning, the Community's continued growth required an expanding financial base and active communal participation, and this support was not forthcoming to the needed extent. Moreover, the Great Depression was having its effect on the Sephardi community. By the fall of 1931, the Community found its membership greatly depleted due to demographic changes and its financial support falling due to the ravages of the depression.

When the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies refused its request for an allocation, the Community was forced to close its center, which had been the core and mainstay of its educational, religious, and recreational activities and their social services. The Talmud Torah was moved to rented quarters, and staff-time and salaries were cut in half. Yet expenses continued to exceed income, forcing the board to discontinue all of its activities. The Community's death knell was sounded in November 1932 when its constituent societies voted to disaffiliate.<sup>38</sup>

The demise of the Sephardic Jewish Community of New York did not lay to rest the conflicts which were pulling asunder the body politic of the Sephardi immigrant community: the conflicts between those who wanted to maintain the status quo, i.e., the preservation of

the accustomed, society-oriented life, and those who strove to transcend the divisions of the past and give rise to a united, strong Sephardi community. Throughout the 1930s both factions lived up to their respective natures, the status quo preservers by digging in their heels and resisting all efforts by communal leaders to rouse them out of their passive resistance, and the activists by living up to the admonishment "if at first you don't succeed, try, try again"!

Several efforts made during the 1930s proved unsuccessful, however. The tide turned in April 1941, when Dr. Nissim J. Ovadia, the chief rabbi of Paris, arrived in New York. Ovadia, who had escaped from France with the help of both Jews and Gentiles, threw the weight of his charismatic personality on the side of those who sought change and progress. It was he who issued the next clarion call for a centralized Sephardi communal structure for the sake of keeping faith with the Sephardi heritage.

The news of Rabbi Ovadia's arrival traversed the Sephardi community with the speed and impact of an electric current, eliciting interest and anticipation even in the Greek- and Arabic-speaking groups, which since the dissolution of the Federation of Oriental Jews had held aloof from involvement in Sephardi communal life. Fifteen hundred people came to a meeting called to greet and honor him. Speaker after speaker stressed the need for a united, active Sephardic community and for a strong, inspired leader to help Sephardim to achieve this goal.

Dr. Ovadia proved, indeed, to be an inspired and inspiring leader. He offered his fellow Sephardim a historical perspective of their communal struggles and gave them credit for having begun the attempt to achieve communal unity while still wrestling with basic survival problems. Their early attempts, he said, had been doomed to failure not only by language barriers and cultural diversity but also by their total lack of experience in forming and maintaining a centralized pluralistic community structure. Now, however, Sephardim had achieved a degree of communal maturity that would enable them to forge ahead and form a strong, united, vital community, following the traditional concept which throughout the ages had enabled Jews to survive as a people, and which still had the force to evoke the adherence of modern youth. He viewed Sephardi unity

not as an act of separatism but as an attempt to recruit forces which are now divided and dispersed in order to press them into service of the Jewish cause. . . . For the time being we, Sephardim and Ashkenazim, must remain separately strong so that we might become strong together. We need each other and the world needs us all. . . . It was for this purpose that I accepted with deep humility the invitation of the dispersed Sephardi community of the United States to cooperate with Dr. Pool and other spiritual leaders in the United States in forming an organization to serve our own group, Jewry as a whole and, last but not least, the world.

Assurance was given to each and all groups that the Central Community was in no way aiming at reducing their independence, and that its goal would be to achieve coordination of all the various activities so as to avoid waste and duplication and allow communal resources to be used to the best advantage of all Sephardim. As a result of these efforts, the societies decided to affiliate and to permit a Central Community to take on the supervision of their synagogues and Talmud Torah, as well as to effect any reorganization deemed necessary. The societies also agreed that the amount of the communal membership fee would be determined by the numerical strength of each society, and lastly, they pledged to inform their members that in joining a Central Community dedicated to enhancing the welfare of the Sephardim, they, as members, would be making "a definite contribution to Judaism."

The Central Sephardic Jewish Community of America came into being in 1941, with Dr. Ovadia elected its chief rabbi, Henri J. Periah its president, and an assembly of delegates and board of directors composed of societal delegates and communal lay leaders. The affiliation of all the societies was celebrated on May 4, 1942. Near the end of the month Dr. Ovadia had his first premonition of heart trouble; in August he was felled by a fatal heart attack.<sup>39</sup>

Dr. Ovadia's death stunned the Sephardi community and was experienced as a crushing blow by its leaders. They felt orphaned, rudderless, and overwhelmed, yet were mindful of their obligation to their fallen leader and gave voice to it in their eulogy:

He was a conqueror of hearts, an intellectual giant, a dreamer. . . . If his spirit were audible here tonight, he would say to us: "In the name of God do not forsake what I have begun! If you have love in heart for my memory, continue this

work!" Let us, therefore, go forward until we attain the good for which he labored and gave his life.

The appeal not to betray the leader they were mourning rallied the assembly of delegates and board of directors to formulate the objectives of the Central Community along the lines drawn up by Dr. Ovadia.<sup>40</sup>

To establish community-wide communication, the Central Community, in 1943, began publishing an organ of its own, the *Sephardi*, a periodical intended to serve the central organization and also to be

a connecting link between the various communities in the United States and Latin America, so that the united Sephardic Jewry could work alongside the World Jewish organizations . . . to help our brethren in devastated grove and in Africa. . . . this is an obligation which historic circumstances have placed upon us.

With the exception of an occasional article in Judeo-Spanish by Rabbi Isaac Alcalay, who had been appointed chief rabbi, the *Sephardi* was published in English. It appeared three times a year for the next ten years and, sporadically until 1959, reaching 4,000 individuals, organizations, and out-of-town communities.<sup>41</sup>

By 1944 it became evident to some members of the board of directors that fund-raising, no matter how successful, was not an end in itself and communal needs would not be met by mere resolutions and statements of goals, but that a competent staff-person was needed to transform lofty aims into actual deeds. With the employment of a trained and experienced community organizer as executive director, the Central Community, in the course of the following five years, proceeded to realize many of its objectives.

Among other things, the *Sephardi*, which had appeared only once in 1943, was relaunched, a Sephardi Veterans Post was established, and a Centralized Location Service was set up to assist survivors of the Holocaust to locate their relatives in this country and to help American Sephardim find their relations abroad. Special funds raised for overseas needs were distributed by the Joint Distribution Committee, and packages of food and clothing were sent overseas. Small neighborhood congregations were assisted to join together to achieve better standards of Jewish education and religious services. Studies of the needs of Sephardi aged resulted in the eventual establishment of

the Sephardic Home for the Aged, and studies of the needs of Sephardi youth led to the employment of a full-time youth director. In addition, the Women's Division became active in the war effort, working closely with the American Red Cross, the National Council of Jewish Women, and other organizations.

At the very moment, however, when the Central Community seemed to be on the way to realizing the dream cherished by enlightened Sephardi immigrants, that of developing an authentic Sephardi cultural life, divisiveness and apathy, the old enemies of Sephardi communal unity, made themselves felt again. In the course of 1946–47 it became evident that a change of mood was setting in, manifested by the fact that the usual complaints that the Community was not doing enough were being replaced by allegations that it was doing rather too much and was, thus, overshadowing the societies.

The Community did its best to allay the concerns of the societal leaders, stressing the fact that it was a communal organization composed of diverse but equal parts working toward common goals. But these efforts notwithstanding, the attitude of the societal leaders was reminiscent of Heinrich Heine's famous dictum: "I was baptized but not converted."

The resistance to being "converted," to being bona fide partners in a centralized communal structure, was manifested by poor attendance at board meetings and diminishing campaign contributions, and seemed to gather strength with each and every demonstrated success in activities and service performed by the Central Community. This situation led to the resignation of the executive director, followed by that of his replacement some two years later, leaving Dr. Alcalay to shoulder a great deal of administrative work in addition to the responsibility of spiritual leadership.<sup>42</sup>

Over the next few years, the Central Community attempted a number of structural changes that met some of the societal demands while allowing it to proceed with its main goals. In 1955 the Community went a step further, putting the societies in control of the organization. It soon became evident, however, that a structural reorganization was unable to effect any changes in the basic problems besetting the Community, let alone solve them. The Community still

lacked the money to fund needed services, and the level of participation by the societal representatives remained woefully low.

The retirement of Dr. Alcalay in 1968 left the Central Community in a state of suspended animation, as it were, with nothing left but its name—a name kept alive by the work of its Women's Division. As for the societies which constituted the legal base upon which every one of the organized community structures had been based, they themselves began to lapse into inactivity during the 1960s, their sole function now being to provide burial services. The Syrian Sephardim were the only exception; their communal life continues to develop and progress.<sup>43</sup>

In 1972 this author, in person and by questionnaire, contacted the Central Community's former leaders and those still serving, albeit nominally, to sound them out on their views of the Community's past effectiveness and its chances for an eventual comeback. All of the respondents agreed that the Central Community had, indeed, provided services which the societies had been unable to provide on their own. These included the standardization and formalization of Jewish education and religious services; the financial and moral support of religious schools and congregations; coordination of fund-raising drives; helping Sephardi World War II refugees adapt to the American scene; sponsorship of citywide youth activities and provision of scholarships; being instrumental in the establishment of the Sephardic Home for the Aged and the Sephardic Center of the Bronx; providing a forum for the discussion of common problems; giving societal leaders the opportunity to meet and work out more cooperative *modi operandi*; and last but not least, serving as spokesman for all Sephardim.

On the other hand, some felt that the mutual-aid societies and congregations met the basic needs of their members to a degree which precluded any need to belong to and identify with an overall communal structure, citing the Home for the Aged as an example of a flourishing communal enterprise which, according to many respondents, had, indeed syphoned off both leadership and funds from the Central Community. The growing number of Ashkenazi-Sephardi marriages were also perceived to be contributing to the disintegration of the Community, as well as a growing rift between wealthy Sephardim

called upon to provide money and intellectuals bent upon preserving the purity of their ideas.

Nonetheless, a clear-cut majority of the respondents came out in favor of a revitalized Community with the following updated objectives: to infuse the young generation with a greater knowledge and commitment to Sephardi history, tradition, and values; to persuade them to become active members of the Sephardi fold; to participate actively in efforts to meet the needs of the Sephardi and general Jewish communities in America and abroad; to obtain better services for Sephardim in Israel and serve as a spokesman for all Sephardim. But all agreed that only a leader of the stature of Dr. Nissim Ovadia would be able to achieve so sweeping a revitalization, and some expressed hopes that such a leader might yet emerge: ". . . the chances are minimal but—who knows? After all man has reached the moon!"

At present, however, despite valiant efforts by the Women's Division to prod it out of its total inactivity, the Community has remained moribund. In January of 1990, Mrs. Emily Levy, who had served as president of the Central Community for the preceding eight years, announced that the parent organization had turned its remaining assets over to the Women's Division, which would become the representational body for the entire Central Community.<sup>44</sup>

### *The American Sephardi Federation*

While struggling to create a unified, viable Sephardi community on American soil, Sephardi leaders had retained their ties to Sephardim across the world and had felt the urge to join with historically conscious Sephardim in other countries and resume an active, creative role in the life of *Klal Yisrael*. This led to the establishment of the Sephardi World Federation in 1925 and to the opening of an American branch in 1951, using the Central Sephardic Jewish Community as a core from which to communicate with communities and groups throughout the land. The decline of the Central Community affected the branch's ability to sustain the interest and allegiance it had managed to build up, and the death of its chairman, Simon Nessim, further scaled down its activities.

This situation became a serious concern to the Sephardi World Federation, which went to work on bringing the American branch back to life. Some fifty Sephardi leaders from across the land, as well as outstanding members of the World Zionist Organization and the Jewish Agency, assembled in Chicago in October 1972 and worked out plans to revitalize the organization under the name of the American Sephardi Federation. Its first convention, in February 1973, was attended by 250 delegates who reaffirmed their determination to strengthen and foster Sephardi religious and cultural life in America, as well as to serve Sephardi communities in Israel and the world.

Under the leadership of its first president, Daniel J. Elazar, the American Sephardi Federation was especially successful in stimulating enthusiasm among the youth. National conclaves of young adults were organized. Congregations and communities were inspired to develop cultural interests and activities. Teenagers were enabled to spend a summer in Israel and came back with a strengthened feeling and insight into their Sephardi identity. And with increased self-esteem came also a greater participation in all phases of general Jewish life in their respective communities.

In spite of these successes, however, the initial impetus began to weaken within the next few years. Attendance at board meetings began to decline, diminishing financial support led to the resignation of the executive director and to the discontinuance of the productive youth programs, and Sephardi public interest seemed to vanish. For all these reasons the work of the American Sephardi Federation slowed down considerably.

Still, all the sparks had not been extinguished, and in 1985, the newly elected president, Leon Levy, decided to bring the Federation back to life. Gifted with vision and leadership, using his own funds and enlisting further financial support from individuals and organizations, he succeeded in reactivating the Federation. To ensure continued interest, he instituted, in addition to general membership dues, a President's Circle of Advisers, with each member pledging to contribute a minimum of \$1,000 to support the Federation's ongoing activities and committing themselves to play an active role in guiding its future activities.

During Levy's presidency the American Sephardi Federation has held three national conventions, the largest, in Seattle in 1989, attracting 600 delegates. In 1987, the Federation's Young Leadership Division began publishing the *Sephardic Connection*. The year 1988 saw the employment of a full-time social worker with many years of experience in the field of community organization. More recently, a full-time youth director and a public relations director were added to the staff. The Federation's current organ, *Sephardi Highlights*, keeps members apprised of its activities.

The American Sephardi Federation hopes to promote the maintenance of a Sephardi cultural identity and at the same time to forge a new direction for the future of American Jewish life as a whole. Its seven-pronged program includes an increased advocacy for Jews in distressed lands, coordinating its activities with those of the World Organization of Jews of Arab Countries, the International Coalition for Rescue of the Jews of Yemen, and other such groups. The Federation has also established a new Sephardic Resource Center which provides books and audiovisual materials to "teach teachers" about Sephardi culture; and it plans a major demographic study to facilitate planning and to bring Sephardi concerns to the attention of world Jewry.

Federation efforts to develop young Sephardi leaders include ongoing seminars, workshops, and shabatons throughout the country and planning for Project Sepharad 1992, commemorating the expulsion of the Jews of Spain and the warm welcome they received in the Ottoman Empire. This last consideration led a large number of Sephardim to form the American Association of Jewish Friends of Turkey, a group seeking to ensure a proper stress on the beneficent role the Ottoman Empire had at the time of Jewish need.

In late 1989, world Jewish leaders announced the formation of the International Jewish Committee for Sepharad 1992. Yitzhak Navon, former president of Israel and current minister of education and culture, was its founder and chairman, and it was spearheaded by the World Sephardi Federation and its president, Nessim D. Gaon. Headquartered in New York City, the Committee was directed by the executive vice-president of the American Sephardi Federation, Hal M. Lewis.

We have seen initial successes followed by deterioration, and we have seen dedicated civic and religious leaders refuse to admit defeat,

choosing instead to start all over again. In the end, their dream of achieving a strong, united, viable Sephardi community was defeated by a combination of forces—external ones, such as demographic shifts and upward economic mobility, and internal ones, such as the resistance of the entrenched leaders of the societies and other groups to yield any of their autonomy, as well as the unwillingness of those who had achieved affluence to join or to contribute funds to a united central community.

The current interaction between Sephardim in America and in Israel is mutually beneficial. Limited as this rebirth may be, it represents a tribute to the determination and dedication of the early immigrants, who, their failures notwithstanding, were able to preserve enough Sephardi cohesion, self-respect, and drive to allow their grandchildren to embark on a quest of their own. It is a quest to unearth the neglected wellsprings of Sephardi creativity and to ensure that these treasures find their rightful place in the cultural heritage of Jewry as a whole.

The continued existence of the American Sephardi Federation as a communal umbrella organization which offers its services to an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 American Sephardim holds the best hope for the preservation of a Sephardi communal identity in the United States. All its efforts need and deserve substantial support from the total Jewish community. This support will be well justified because Jewish life in America today must gather and cherish all its cultural sources in order to ensure its continued well-being and growth.

*Nissim Behar*

I cannot bring myself to close this bird's-eye view of twentieth-century Sephardi immigrant life in North America without paying at least a brief tribute to an outstanding Sephardi personality who dedicated his life to the service of his people, without ever seeking the limelight and without hesitating to share his all-too-meager means with those whose needs he deemed to be greater than his own.

Born in Jerusalem in 1848 into a distinguished rabbinical family, Nissim Behar received his talmudic instruction from his father and his maternal grandfather, a famous kabbalist. A recipient of an

Alliance Israélite Universelle scholarship to the Ecole Orientale in Paris, Behar graduated in 1869 and was appointed to open up Alliance schools in Aleppo, Syria, and Samacoff (Samakov), Bulgaria. In 1875, he was entrusted with the directorship of the most prestigious of the Alliance schools, that in Constantinople (Istanbul).

Seven years later, Nissim Behar returned to Jerusalem to open a school there which would incorporate his pedagogic vision. In what was at the time a revolutionary departure from the norm, he combined an academic curriculum with a vocational workshop to better meet the needs of the city's children, and also taught Hebrew by what came to be called the *Ivrit b'Ivrit* method. This decision provided a badly needed job for Eliezer Ben Yehuda, who was then toiling on the first modern Hebrew dictionary.

On opening day, the school had one student. It took enormous persistence and courage and all of Behar's powers of persuasion and personal magnetism to overcome the antagonism and resistance of Jerusalem's Sephardi and Ashkenazi religious leaders and induce them to allow children to attend the school, whose reputation soon began to attract non-Jewish children. By 1897, when Behar was sent to Europe to mobilize interest and support for the Alliance schools, the Jerusalem school counted 400 students; at the time of his death thirty-four years later, its student body numbered more than 1,500.

In his three years of traveling through Europe, Behar engaged the interest of leading non-Jewish as well as Jewish personalities and was received in audience by King Victor Emmanuel II of Italy and by Pope Pius X. In 1901 Behar was sent to America to revitalize the Alliance chapters there and organize new ones. He conscientiously executed his assignment but soon found his attention claimed by a multitude of problems.

Becoming an American citizen turned Behar, ipso facto, into an American activist. In 1903, galvanized into action by the Kishinev massacre, he persuaded influential Christian ministers to condemn, ex cathedra, pogroms against a religious minority. In addition, he launched a nationwide campaign urging the U.S. government to abrogate its 1832 Commerce and Friendship Treaty with Russia because of the latter's refusal to grant visas to American citizens of Russian Jewish descent. This so-called Passport Question, which

alarmed and upset many Jewish establishment leaders, culminated in President Taft's abrogation of the treaty in 1912.

Troubled by the plight of immigrants, Behar founded the National Liberal Immigration League and recruited Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard, and Woodrow Wilson, president of Princeton, among the board members. In 1906, perceiving that Jewish rights could best be protected and Jewish causes most effectively championed if American Jewry's diverse organizations coordinated their efforts, he founded the Federation of Jewish Organizations—an unprecedented event which evoked displeasure and opposition on the part of many Jewish power-brokers. As journalist Abraham Goldberg recalled,

The enemies of the new organization kept on saying: "Who is Behar? Who invested him with authority?" They pointed to the fact that he was a Sephardic Jew and not a member of the majority. Nevertheless, his maligners plagiarized his ideas and put them to their own use. . . . But it was he and he alone who was the progenitor of the various Jewish political movements in this country.

Space does not permit me to touch on a great number of other achievements of this remarkable man, who, unfortunately, has been overlooked by the scholars and chroniclers of Jewish life. I can only hope that future historians will correct this injustice and grant Nissim Behar his rightful place in the history and esteem of the Jewish people.<sup>45</sup>

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