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**Stephen H. Norwood and
Eunice G. Pollack, Editors**

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Immigration and Settlement

Sephardic Jews in America

The first Jewish settlers in what is today the United States were Sephardim of primarily Portuguese origin, many of them New Christian refugees of the Inquisition. Though Ashkenazim outnumbered them by the 1720s, Sephardim continued to exercise religious and institutional hegemony in the general Jewish community until the 1840s. Their dwindling population was replenished in the 1880s by primarily Ladino-speaking Sephardim from the crumbling Ottoman Empire, mostly (Judeo-)Arabic-speaking Mizrahim, and (Judeo-)Greek-speaking Romaniote Jews, numbering 30,000–60,000 in all. Tens of thousands of Jews from Arab and Muslim lands, speaking mostly (Judeo-)Arabic and (Judeo-)Farsi, arrived as refugees after the founding of the State of Israel. Since the 1980s, Catholic Hispanics of the American Southwest have emerged from hiding to assert their crypto-Jewish origins, and many have joined the organized Jewish community.

Currently representing some 3 percent of the U.S. Jewish population, Sephardi, Mizrahi, and Romaniote Jews attest to the diversity of the Jewish people, overlapping culturally and linguistically with other ethnic groups that do not commonly interact with American Jews. Mizrahi Jews are native to the Maghreb and western and central Asia, while the Romaniote are indigenous to Byzantium, or the eastern Roman Empire. Although, strictly speaking,

Sephardim are Jews who trace their ancestry to what are today Spain and Portugal—*Sefarad* was the medieval Hebrew word for the Iberian Peninsula—in modern times *Sephardic* has come to function as an umbrella term for all non-Ashkenazic Jews. Indeed, some attribute the relatively recent and now widespread adoption by Arab and Persian Jews of the term *Sephardi* to the “aristocratic cachet” of a Hispanic origin, “more desirable than a connection to Moslem culture” (Elkin 1988).

Spoken Judeo-Arabic varied widely depending on dialect and was sometimes unintelligible to gentile neighbors; the written language was completely unintelligible to most outsiders because it was written in Hebrew letters. Twentieth-century Judeo-Arabic, now declining as a spoken language as rapidly as Ladino, includes elements of classical Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Judeo-Greek (sometimes called Romaniote or Yevanic) increasingly lost its distinctiveness after the influx of Judeo-Iberian refugees in the late fifteenth century. Modern Judeo-Greek, which has almost completely disappeared, is somewhat distinct from the Greek spoken by Christians (including phonetic, intonational, and lexical differences); unlike Judeo-Arabic and Ladino, native speakers of Judeo-Greek did not consider their language distinct from that of their Christian neighbors. Judeo-Farsi dialects were formed from largely extinct local Persian dialects and are mutually unintelligible, with relatively few additions from

Hebrew and Aramaic (in comparison to European Jewish languages). Iranian Jews also cultivated a jargon, combining Persian or a local dialect with a large number of Hebrew and Aramaic loan words, that permitted them to secretly communicate in the presence of non-Jews.

As a distinct subethnic group in the United States, Jewish descendants of Spain and Portugal gained popular exposure in the early 1970s with the publication of Stephen Birmingham's best-selling book, *The Grandees*. This popular history, though laden with distortions and factual errors and criticized for its gossipy nature, succeeded "in making the public aware of the existence of Sephardim." As one reviewer remarked, *The Grandees* "created a stir not only among Jews in general but among many of those of the Christian community who perhaps had not even heard in all their lives the word Sephardic." Birmingham chronicles the history of a people who envisioned themselves "an elite, the nobility of Jewry, with the longest, richest, most romantic history" (Ben-Ur 1998).

The *Grandees* of Birmingham's account were descendants of Iberian Jews, many of them refugees of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, whose mass migration to North America via Western Europe, the Caribbean, and South America began in the mid-seventeenth century. The first among them—twenty-three men, women, and children who arrived by mishap in Nieuw Amsterdam (present-day New York) after the Portuguese recapture of Recife, Brazil, in 1654—are considered the first Jews to settle in what is today the United States. Among the illustrious successors of the seventeenth-century arrivals are Judah Touro (1775–1854), merchant and philanthropist, and his father, Isaac, for whom the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, is named; Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785–1851), politician, journalist, and playwright; Emma Lazarus (1849–1887), whose verses are inscribed on the Statue of Liberty; Annie Nathan Meyer (1867–1951), a founder of Barnard College; and U.S. Supreme Court justice Benjamin Nathan Cardozo (1870–1938). The public prominence of American Sephardim, their dramatic history of forced conversion to Christianity, Inquisitorial persecution, and subsequent return to professing Judaism, as well as their legendary noble descent (part of what Ismar Schorsch has called the "myth of Sephardi supremacy"), are what led Birmingham to nickname these acculturated Jews the *Grandees*.

As prominent as they eventually became in economic, literary, political, and civic affairs, Sephardic Jews also had

a decisive and enduring impact on the development of the American Jewish community. Until 1802, all Jewish houses of worship were founded by Sephardim and followed the Judeo-Iberian rite, distinctive for its stately decorum, occasional use of Spanish and Portuguese, vernacular sermons, western Sephardi cantillation, and expurgation of kabbalistic liturgy. The most distinguished of these, New York's Congregation Shearith Israel (Remnant of Israel, 1655), was later joined by Savannah's Mikveh Israel (1735), Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel (Hope of Israel, 1740), Charleston's Beth Elohim (1750), Newport's Jeshuat Israel, today known as the Touro Synagogue (Salvation of Israel, 1763), and Richmond's Beth Shalom (House of Peace, 1789).

The synagogue-community developed by the Sephardic Jews, in effect the Jewish communal government responsible for maintaining local Jewish life, was the paradigm that shaped America's Jewish settlements. Thus, until the late eighteenth century, the only Jewish institution in a given community was the local Sephardic synagogue, which provided for the ritual needs of its members and withheld privileges, with varying degrees of success, from religious transgressors (Sarna 2004). The first Jewish school in New York, Yeshibat Minhath Areb, opened by Sephardim in 1731, was reorganized as the Polonies Talmud Torah after the American Revolution and retained its Sephardi rite in its "translation of the Hebrew and the instruction of the service of the synagogue" until at least 1821 (Ben-Ur 1998). The founders of New York's Jewish Theological Seminary of America, eventually associated with the Conservative movement, first met in the 1880s in the elegance of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue (Congregation Shearith Israel) and counted among themselves a number of Sephardim. Well after the American Revolution and the proliferation of Judeo-Germanic synagogues, a number of Sephardi congregations and institutions were founded in various cities by Ashkenazim accustomed to the rite of their Hispanic coreligionists.

The western Sephardi tradition of the *Grandees* was also manifest in the language and collective historical memory of a crypto-Jewish past (the major forced conversions of Jews on the Iberian Peninsula occurred in 1391 and 1497). When Haim Isaac Carigal, a native of Hebron, Palestine, visited North American Jews in 1773, he chose to address his Newport audience in "Spanish," interspersed with Hebrew (Chyet 1966). Many Sephardim treasured

heroic tales of escape from Iberia, among them Zipporah Nunes (1714–1799), great-grandmother of Mordecai Noah, who transmitted a harrowing account of her family's flight from the clutches of the Portuguese Inquisition in the early 1700s.

Travelers' descriptions, memoirs, letters, and genealogies suggest a community in an advanced stage of cultural integration with white Protestant society. Life in an environment that stressed consent over descent (i.e., an individual's choice over the constraints of tradition) and whose ruling class accepted Sephardim on some levels as equals facilitated this integration, as did the legacy of a former Christian existence. (The Catholicism of their ancestors, though at odds with Protestantism, gave Sephardim familiarity with Christian concepts and conditioned them for cultural adaptation.) Male members of the short-lived original Jewish community of Savannah, Georgia, first established in 1733, engaged in military service and were permitted to bear arms. A Protestant professor and promoter of conversion noted disdainfully in 1738, "The English, prominent and common alike, take the Jews for their equals. . . . They carouse, play, go for walks with them, and let them take part in all their fun. They even desecrate the Sunday with the Jews, which no Jew would do on his Sabbath to please a Christian" (Plaut 1939). The sons of Dr. Nunes, the community's heroic founding father, occasionally attended church. Malcolm Stern's thorough genealogical research of the 1950s revealed so many Christian branches grafted onto the trunks of colonial Jewish families (some 40,000 individuals) that it made sense to title the first edition of his book *Americans of Jewish Descent*. The acculturation of colonial Sephardim throughout the North American colonies paralleled similar patterns among contemporaneous Ashkenazim. Both groups, aspiring to middle-class status, quickly learned to emulate Christian ideals. To act respectably was to adopt the mores of Protestant, white, middle-class society.

The Sephardic population was always small relative to the gentile and was outnumbered by the burgeoning Central European Ashkenazi community by the third decade of the eighteenth century. New York City's Jewish population in 1810 numbered 300–400 Jews, 70–80 of those being unmarried male members of Congregation Shearith Israel. Acculturation and marriage with both gentiles and Ashkenazim weakened the distinctive traits of Sephardic Jews. By the close of the eighteenth century, Portuguese had com-

pletely disappeared as a spoken language and Spanish had nearly done so. Judge Benjamin N. Cardozo confessed in a 1937 letter that "[s]o far as my family is concerned it has no cultural traditions with reference to the survival of Spanish or with reference to its Spanish or Portuguese origin" (Benardete 1982).

Yet, largely due to its enduring religious institutions, the distinct Judeo-Iberian ethos (with its historical consciousness and sense of cultural refinement) was never completely abandoned. Mair José Benardete noted that, although Western Sephardim (also known as old Sephardim) may have lost their "Hispanic culture," they have "endeavored to maintain [their Sephardic] being through the substratum, that is, the Jewish religion" (Benardete 1982). Solomon Solis Cohen, addressing the congregation in 1903, with a derisive nod at the Reform movement noted that the remnant of Sefarad in America had "withstood the rising tide of innovation" by refusing to allow modernizing trends to infiltrate their religious ritual: Sephardim "have preserved in the synagogue the olden Jewish forms of worship and of thought" (Ben-Ur 1998).

During their roughly 250-year residence in America, the Grandees had defined what it meant to be a Sephardi in the United States. The influx of 30,000–60,000 Jews from the disintegrating Ottoman Empire between 1880 and 1924—representing the largest group of Sephardic Jews ever to immigrate to North America—portended a definitive transformation. The overwhelming majority of the new wave was Eastern Sephardic and spoke Ladino (not Spanish or Portuguese), a language based on early modern Castilian with admixtures of Portuguese, Italian, Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, Aramaic, and French and traditionally written in Hebrew letters. These Jews traced their ancestry to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 and the subsequent home the exiles found in the Ottoman Empire, where they resided in relative calm for the next four hundred years.

Economically and educationally disadvantaged, speaking distinct languages, and exhibiting Middle Eastern dress and mores, the masses of Levantine Jews were, in Annie Nathan Meyer's words, "an altogether different sort" of Sephardi (Ben-Ur 1998). As newcomers, Levantine Jews had no American colonial or revolutionary history of which to boast. Not even their Sephardi rite easily united them with the Grandees, for it was distinctly "Oriental," a number of prayers were recited in Ladino, and the liturgical

melodies reflected Levantine, not Western, musical traditions. History, too, was a dividing factor. While both Sephardic groups shared a common medieval ancestry on the Iberian Peninsula, their postexilic experiences differed radically. Levantine Jews, by and large, had existed under Muslim dominion in the Ottoman Empire, in contrast to old Sephardim, who generally hailed from Christian lands. Unlike old Sephardim, whose Western communities were founded primarily by former secret Jews, most new Sephardim proudly identified with ancestors who had chosen expulsion over forced conversion.

As the leading American institution to preserve old Sephardic identity and communal cohesiveness, Congregation Shearith Israel stepped forward in 1912 to assist in the reception and integration of the immigrants. The attitude of Western Sephardim toward the new arrivals was complex. On the one hand, the established community accepted the easterners as "our nearest kin," "whose ritual is our own, whose Hebrew accent is our own, whose traditions are our own, and whose ancestry and history are our own" (Ben-Ur 1998). Moreover, the congregation fretted over its dwindling numbers: "As we number the congregation to-day," spiritual leader David de Sola Pool noted, "how many can we count bearing the honored name of Judah, Gomez, Hart, Hays or Seixas—families once so numerous in this synagogue?" (Ben-Ur 1998). The newcomers were regarded as a replenishing and enriching force that gave "promise of an efflorescence of Sephardic life in the metropolis which shall be worthy of the finest pages in the annals of Sephardic Jewish life on this continent" (Ben-Ur 1998).

On the other hand, Congregation Shearith Israel recognized important cultural and ritual differences, such as Middle Eastern-style cantillation and the use of Ladino in liturgy, that it alternately respected and derided as "Oriental." The *Shearith Israel Bulletin* declared that "[t]he religious tradition that these descendants of medieval Spanish Jewry bring with them is of the finest; and our congregation must be foremost in every effort to preserve it" (Ben-Ur 1998). But outside observers and immigrants themselves quickly detected a class-based layer of condescension. *The World* noted that the congregation's volunteer social workers "think them [Eastern Sephardic immigrants] unrelated to the famous Spanish Jews of the Middle Ages, for these latest arrivals are not distinguished intellectually. . . . The women are garment makers in the

poorest shops and the men are most frequently boot-blacks" (Ben-Ur 1998).

This haughtiness was also culturally motivated. In 1912, the congregation's sisterhood eagerly sought to Westernize Levantine immigrants by offering piano instruction and language classes to enable the immigrants to replace their Ladino with "the true Spanish-Castilian" (Ben-Ur 1998). Eastern Sephardim were ambivalent about the partnership. While in desperate need of philanthropy and guidance, they preferred to retain their "traditions, their various customs and their ways of conducting things [synagogue services]" (Ben-Ur 1998). On several occasions, their deep offense at the congregation's condescension led to boycotts of synagogue events or outright secession.

The conflicts between Western and Eastern Sephardim repeated earlier patterns within the broader Jewish community. Colonial Sephardim had initially been reluctant to intermarry with Central European Jews, regarding themselves as aristocratic and looking down upon Ashkenazim for their lack of refinement. Ashkenazim, in turn, looked askance at what they considered laxity in Sephardic religious observance. Still, the overriding pattern was Ashkenazic emulation of Sephardim and the unqualified acceptance of Ashkenazim into the Sephardic fold. A repeat performance occurred in the 1880s when Americanized Jews, predominantly of Germanic background, protested the influx of their Eastern coreligionists and regarded their Lower East Side enclave as an alarming mesh of medieval provincialism and political radicalism.

The two Sephardic subgroups, however, did not seriously endanger the reputation of American Jewry. Western Sephardim were a Jewish minority not commonly associated with mainstream Jewish America, in part because outsiders generally did not recognize the family names of both groups—Hendricks, Gomez, Nathan; and Soulam, Testa, Capouya—as Jewish. In addition, gentiles did not identify Levantine Jews physiognomically as Jewish but rather as Christian Greeks, Hispanics, and Italians. Thus, the conflict between Western and Eastern Sephardim was much more internal than the meeting of German Jews with *Ostjuden*, producing a subethnic conversation of which other American Jews were unaware. Western Sephardim did express concern for the image of Sephardim in the eyes of the American public but were more preoccupied with the achievement of public recognition as Jews by the Ashkenazic and non-Jewish communities in America. This

concern provided a powerful impetus for the formation and preservation of a unified American Sephardic identity.

Levantine Jews, with their unfamiliar physiognomy, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean tongues, and distinct religious and social customs, baffled their Ashkenazic brethren. In the words of a satirist, "[H]ow could you be a Jew when you looked like an Italian, spoke Spanish, and never saw a matsah ball in your life?" (Ben-Ur 1998). A female contributor to the newspaper *La America* lamented, "[O]ur existence almost until the present day was not recognized even by our coreligionists, the Ashkenazim, some of them taking us for Greeks, others considering us Italians or Turks, but none taking us for Jews" (Ben-Ur 1998). The misunderstanding also came to the attention of the New York municipality. Sometime between 1909 and 1913, a number of Ashkenazic Jews of the Lower East Side protested the presence of the "Turks in our midst" and petitioned Mayor William Jay Gaynor for their removal. Upon learning that these "Turks" were fellow Jews, the Ashkenazim withdrew the petition (Ben-Ur 1998). "Co-ethnic recognition failure," defined as a co-ethnic's denial of a group member's common ethnicity, betrays the parochial self-awareness of Jews who assumed that only "Yiddish and its associated cultural symbols defined Jewish identity" (Ben-Ur 1998, Glazier 1985).

The reports of this experience from a variety of sources—contemporaneous and reminiscent, Jewish and gentile—make it clear that the experience was neither folkloric nor a case of snobbery. Forged of ignorance, it occurred everywhere Eastern Sephardim settled, including Seattle, Indianapolis, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. When Ladino newspapers were not available as evidence of Jewishness, an enlightened Ashkenazi leader, typically a rabbi, would undertake to enlighten his flock. Shortly after the arrival of Levantine immigrants, a Reform rabbi of Indianapolis began to visit various Ashkenazi communities and synagogues in the area, affirming that the new arrivals were "real Jews" (Glazier 2000). In Seattle, the spiritual leader of the city's Orthodox Jews took "great pains to explain to his members that the Sephardim were just as Jewish as those of the Ashkenazim . . . and that they too were sons of Israel" (Adatto 1939).

The denial of shared ethnicity and religion was perhaps the most painful and frustrating reaction Levantine Sephardim encountered in their dealings with Ashkenazim, especially when it impeded their employment.

Ladino newspaper editor Moise Gadol lamented that "many of our Turkinos, with tears in their eyes, tell us how, when they present themselves for employment, they are not believed by the Ashkenazim to be Jews, except with very great efforts and with all sorts of explanations" (Ben-Ur 1998).

The Ladino press was an important medium through which Sephardim struggled to achieve recognition as Jews by their fellow Ashkenazim. Between 1910 and 1948, as many as nineteen Judeo-Spanish periodicals appeared in the United States, all but two printed in New York. Moise Gadol's *La America*, dedicated to the adaptation of Levantine Sephardim to the United States, was the first enduring American Ladino tabloid, appearing from 1910 to 1925. In one of the earliest issues, Gadol observed that Turkinos seeking positions in Ashkenazic establishments were often able to convince incredulous employers of their Jewish identity "by showing our tabloid with [its] Hebrew letters," peppered with announcements from the Ashkenazic Jewish press (Ben-Ur 1998).

Addressing a rally of immigrant Sephardi strikers, Gadol proclaimed that, since the appearance of his journal and the 1912 establishment of the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society's Oriental Bureau, responsible for receiving Eastern Jewish immigrants at Ellis Island, "all Ashkenazim are now clear that you are Jews of the same blood and faith" (Ben-Ur 1998). Other reports from that decade and later contradict his self-congratulatory affirmation. Ashkenazim did not refrain from referring to their coreligionists as gentiles (e.g., "Turks"), an image Eastern Sephardim sometimes internalized. "We used to speak about the Jewish guys, and the Sephardics were different," confessed American-born Ben Cohen, whose ancestors immigrated from Monastir, "really strange" (Glazier 1985 and 2000).

Where education campaigns failed, acculturation to mainstream America, intramarriage, and World War II, which effectively ended the isolation of Jewish subgroups, largely succeeded in breaking down barriers. Eventually, a number of Sephardic congregations accepted Ashkenazi rabbis as their leaders, there being few Eastern Sephardi rabbis. In 1972, Ashkenazi religious leaders headed Ladino-heritage congregations in Los Angeles, Seattle, and Cedarhurst (New York). Nearly all Sephardim who immigrated in the early twentieth century married fellow Sephardim; by the third generation, intramarriage "had

become the rule, rather than the exception." Hayyim Cohen found in the early 1970s that 72 percent of second-generation Sephardim had married non-Sephardim, 87 percent of whom were Ashkenazim and 13 percent gentile. The figure jumped to 90 percent in the third and fourth generations (Angel 1973; Cohen 1971/1972).

Arabic-speaking Eastern Jews, generally with no ancestral or cultural bridge connecting them to Western culture, suffered particularly jarring encounters with Ashkenazi coreligionists and gentiles alike. Physiognomy, especially skin color, affected the experience of immigrants as well as their descendants. Dina Dahbany-Miraglia has examined the experiences of Yemeni Jewish immigrants and their children on street corners, in buses, and at social gatherings. When seeking housing in Jewish neighborhoods, these Jews dispatched the "lightest-skinned family member of a friend to do the necessities." To avoid complicated explanations to passersby initiating fleeting contact, Yemenis often accepted "ascription as black, Hispanic, Italian, American Indian, and East Indian" (Dahbany-Miraglia 1988). Syrian Jews, who, like Balkan and Turkish immigrants, settled largely in New York, faced similar quandaries. "The Ashkenazi Jews . . . thought them 'queer,' and the amazed cry of '*Bist du a Yid?*' [Are you a Jew?]' would often greet them as they appeared in a tallit, at a kosher butcher, or at the ritual bath. . . . This gulf of misunderstanding contributed to the Syrians' tendency to withdraw from the general Jewish community" (Sanua 1990).

Such negative experiences contributed to the clannishness of Brooklyn's Syrian American Jews, but fear of acculturation was likely more important. Unlike their Balkan and Turkish brethren, Syrians consistently established their own Jewish day schools and, when public education became mandatory, afterschool programs that maintained their children within the traditional cultural orbit (Sanua 1990, Sutton 1979). Demographers and community members have affirmed the resistance of Syrian Jews to extra-communal marriage with Ashkenazim or gentiles.

The central reason for this success was the presence of a strong rabbinical leadership representing Old Country values and, more importantly, the official acceptance of such values by all Syrian Jewish organizations. The relative rarity of intramarriage and almost nonexistent outmarriage can be traced back to a 1935 decree in Hebrew signed by Syrian rabbis in Bensonhurst (Brooklyn), ratified in 1942 and 1946 and reaffirmed in 1972 and 1984. Joseph

Sutton explained: "Such marriages would not be accepted under any circumstance, even when the non-Jewish partner had converted to Judaism; even if the conversion was not for the purpose of facilitating marriage." A male accepting a gentile or converted spouse would be effectively excommunicated, deprived of religious honors in the synagogue, and forbidden burial in the communal cemetery, his children barred from Syrian schools and rejected as legitimate marriage partners (Sutton 1979 and 1988).

The efficacy of the decree can also be attributed to the geographic ethnic enclaves Syrian Jews have largely maintained. As David Sitton observed in 1962:

They generally live in one area, known as the Jewish neighborhoods of Brooklyn, and they still preserve their ancient traditions and customs. This does not apply only to the elderly and the adult generation, for the youth are equally intent upon preserving their religious and cultural ties. Most of them receive a good grounding in religious values at home, learn to pray "*Arvit*" [evening prayers], and participate en masse in Shabbat and holiday services. Their synagogues are filled to capacity on the Sabbath, and the women's section is no less crowded. (Sitton 1985 [1962])

Affluent lay leaders have also been instrumental in shaping the community's ethnoreligious distinctiveness. The community's leader in 1962 was Yitzhak Shalom, a philanthropist who placed special emphasis on religious instruction. He headed the educational institution *Ozar Hatorah* [Torah treasury], which ran a network of schools and *Talmudei Torah* in New York, North Africa, and Iran. Fund-raising efforts among Jews from Arab lands covered the budgets of these schools, as did support from the Joint Distribution Committee. In the 1960s, 90 percent of New York Syrian Jews enrolled their children in *yeshivot* and *Talmudei Torah*, and by the next decade Syrian Jews were considered "the best organized Sephardi-Eastern Jewish community in the U.S.A." both spiritually and materially (Sitton 1985 [1962]).

The religious denominations that developed in Ashkenazi communities during the first half of the nineteenth century have no parallels in the Sephardi and Mizrahi worlds. This is because Jews outside of Europe were not affected by the challenges of Napoleon's Sanhedrin (which, in exchange for citizenship, challenged French leaders in 1806 to prove that their Jewishness was solely a religion,

not an ethnicity or a peoplehood) and the various European emancipation movements. Once the descendants of Sephardi immigrants had become acculturated to American Ashkenazi society, however, a number of congregations adopted various denominations. Most Sephardi and Mizrahi congregations have found that their tenacity to religious traditions best coincides with the values of American Orthodox Judaism. New York's Congregation Shearith Israel, for example, belongs to the Orthodox Union, and its spiritual leader describes it as "a traditional, Orthodox congregation" (Angel 2004). Mizrahi synagogues, which constitute the majority of non-Ashkenazi congregations, are similarly affiliated with the Orthodox Union.

Subsequent waves of Jewish immigration from North Africa and the Middle East, tied directly to the founding of the State of Israel and the intensification of Arab anti-semitism, have further invigorated the Mizrahi community. About 10,000 Jews from Egypt, many of Syrian and Lebanese backgrounds, arrived in the United States after the 1956 and 1967 wars with Israel, most settling in the Syrian Jewish community of Brooklyn. Mizrahi *yordim* (a derogatory term for Israeli expatriates or, in this case, emigrés from Israel to the United States), numbering nearly 30,000 in the 1960s, have added diversity to New York's non-Ashkenazi population. The U.S. Yemeni community—which had nearly vanished—was replenished starting in 1959 with the immigration of 4,000–5,000 newcomers (Sitton 1985 [1962], Dahbany-Miraglia 1987).

Mashadi Jews are representative of the complexity of non-Ashkenazi communities. Mashadi Jews trace their ancestry to Iran, but their distinct history of forced conversion to Islam in the nineteenth century, subsequent return to Judaism, and current subgroup endogamy set them apart from the rest of the Persian Jewish community. Their principal organ, *Megillah* (published by the Mashadi Youth Committee of Great Neck, New York) appears in both English and Farsi, while their religious schools emphasize English, Hebrew, and Zionism. As a whole, Mizrahi Jews exhibit patterns of cultural retention (such as foodways, life-cycle rituals, and endogamy) not found in many far larger Ashkenazi communities and, particularly before the establishment of the State of Israel, nurtured ties to ethnic groups (such as Muslim and Christian Arabs) popularly considered inimical to world Jewry.

The crypto-Jewish phenomenon of the American Southwest gained national notoriety with the airing of a

documentary on National Public Radio in 1987. In Santa Fe, New Mexico, Catholics of Hispanic background had come forth with tales of secret Jewish customs preserved through the generations. Some claimed to have been initiated into Judaism during young adulthood, when an older relative whispered, "*Somos Judíos* [We are Jews]." In the enthusiastic aftermath of the program, hundreds purchased recordings, and reports of secret Jews in New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, and Arizona proliferated in the domestic and international press.

The dean of the movement, Stanley Hordes, recorded some of the earliest claims to Hispano-Jewish descent while serving as New Mexico's state historian in the early 1980s. In 1990, he and Rabbi Joshua Stampfer of Portland, Oregon, founded the National Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies, self-described as "the major academic organization conducting and encouraging research on the Crypto-Jews." Struggling to delineate the boundary between the academic and the personal, the society recently resolved to make a clearer distinction between scholarly papers and reflections/life stories, and to professionalize its quarterly newsletter/journal, *Ha-Lapid: The Journal of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies* (Ferry and Nathan 2000; <http://www.fiu.edu/~lavender/SCJS%20for%20adl%20website%201-13-04.htm>).

The secret Jewish customs and oral traditions from the American Southwest have come under scrutiny by historians, folklorists, and journalists, who wonder if this is not a case of mistaken identity. Judith Neulander has discovered that many of the purportedly Jewish customs, such as a game with a spinning top akin to a dreidl, are at best of Ashkenazi (not Sephardi) origin and has called crypto-Jews an "imagined community." She and others suggest that the will to be Jewish stems from racism turned inward. Chicanos/Hispanos strive to disassociate themselves from their Native American ancestry by grasping Jewish identity "as a postmodern marker for ethnic purity" (Ferry and Nathan 2000).

Historian David Gitlitz points to the general extinction of hidden Judaism by the late eighteenth century. In a recent interview, he declared the assumption that Jewish ancestry renders one Jewish a "major misconception" (Ramirez 1999). Thus, Hordes's most recent project—to verify the Jewish ancestry of the claimants—would not prove crypto-Jewish authenticity. Seymour Drescher (2001) has noted that the Inquisition was largely successful

in its goals. Even after the wars of independence, secret Jews of Iberian origin (if any survived) did not openly revert to Judaism. Roman Catholicism remained the dominant religion in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Latin America, and only in some isolated villages in Portugal and the Americas was crypto-Judaism "rediscovered or reinvented in the late twentieth century" (Drescher 2001). At the other end of the spectrum are academics who accept the self-proclaimed identity and do not seriously address the historicity of oral tradition or the controversy about invented heritage (Jacobs 2000).

Some doubts have sprung up in the organized Jewish community as well. Rabbi Marc Angel of Congregation Shearith Israel, while inspired by the romanticism of the phenomenon, has nonetheless issued a halakhic recommendation that such claimants formally convert to Judaism in order to eliminate all ambiguity (Angel 1994). Conversely, Daniel Bouskila of Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel in Los Angeles believes that those who seem sincere and have authentic family traditions should be "welcomed back to the community" without conversion (Ramirez 1999). A parallel controversy rages among non-Jewish Hispanics themselves.

Historian Elmer Martínez, director of Albuquerque's Spanish History Museum, is dubious about the historicity of Southwest crypto-Judaism. He notes the absence of "solid documentation," and concluded in the early 1990s, "All we have is rumors and people reading between the lines to try and find it" (Almond 1991). Numerous families in the Southwest have been torn apart by members claiming Jewish descent. Some, echoing Judith Neulander, see this as a fantasy heritage that betrays shame of mestizo ancestry. On the other hand, Hispanics whose families have embraced civil rights activism as well as their own "non-white" phenotypes and ancestry reject Neulander's prestige claim as deeply offensive. With the increase in anti-semitism, some ask rhetorically, what could they possibly gain by being Jews?

The secret Jewish revival has raised many legitimate questions that are often stifled beneath accusations that Jews are reluctant to admit descendants of Native Americans and Hispanics into their ranks or that they are Orthodox bigots who lack compassionate tolerance (Angel 1994). The historian cannot, however, dismiss the questions. Nagging inconsistencies include the intense identification with Spain, even as the overwhelming majority of

New Christians, whether Judaizing or not, who immigrated to the Americas were of Portuguese origin. Moreover, the word *judío* (Jew) was applied on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Iberian Peninsula to liberals, Freemasons, and others considered politically threatening. And the Southwestern disdain for Catholicism is strikingly similar to Native American hostility toward an imposed European religion. Self-proclaimed crypto-Jews who have been exposed as impostors motivated by eagerness for fame and financial gain have also stimulated scholarly caution. The survival of Jewish identity and heritage in the face of Inquisitorial persecution has been universally authenticated for converso descendants in Belmonte, Portugal (beginning in the first half of the twentieth century), but no study of a contemporary crypto-Jewish community can be complete without a consideration of the media's role in creating and shaping ethnic identity.

Since the early twentieth century, attempts to unite Sephardim in the United States have ranged from focusing on Ladino-speaking organizations to including all non-Ashkenazi Jews under the label *Oriental* or *Sephardic Jewish*. Today, under the umbrella of the American Sephardi Federation, non-Ashkenazim with origins as varied as Yemen, India, Iran, Ethiopia, Morocco, Sudan, and Turkey are organizationally united and collectively refer to themselves as Sephardim. Sephardim, Mizrahim, Romaniote Jews, and other non-Ashkenazi groups, some 3 percent of American Jewry, have at last fulfilled the communal aspiration to organize a minority within a minority. Although often their legacies and destinies never intersected before their arrival on American soil, the identities of different groups have now become tightly entwined.

The overwhelming majority of monographs describing the American Jewish past and present seem largely unaware of non-Ashkenazi communities. Narratives stretching back to colonial times typically include a perfunctory mention of Western Sephardim arriving in 1654 and their subsequent assimilation into majority cultures. Studies focusing on the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries rarely devote even one sentence to Eastern Sephardim. Like the failure of the Sephardim's twentieth-century co-ethnics to recognize them, the deep-seated assumption is that Ashkenazi heritage defines Jewishness. But the contemporary American Jewish community cannot be fully understood without considering its component parts, and the portrait of American Jewish history and society

remains incomplete without the integration of non-Ashkenazi Jews.

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American Jews in the Colonial Period

Few Jews lived in colonial British North America. Ten men, a *minyan*, are required for synagogue services, and for much of the time even the five communities that had emerged by the time of the Revolution failed to muster one. The first Jews arrived in New Amsterdam in the early 1650s, but no evidence of Shearith Israel, the first congregation, exists before the 1680s—although it still holds services today at an uptown location. Newport, Rhode Island, probably had a minyan by the third quarter of the