

Sephardim

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I am always upset whenever I am forced to recognize that we Jews, few in number, are so divided into warring sects, denominations, traditions and ideologies. I guess it's just a combination of human nature and historical experience. There's one divide where the facts indicate that things are getting better. Through marriage and the nature of Israeli and Western society, the Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities are slowly coming closer.

I have now been adopted by my Persian community as an honorary Sephardi. Ritual differences are really minor (though one word used in the wrong place can cause riot). But I have learnt that this whole issue of Sephardi and Ashkenazi is something of a minefield. One has to be careful how one calls those Jews who came originally from Muslim countries. It is easy to generalize and offend unwittingly.

Sometimes they are called Arab Jews, because historically, linguistically, and culturally they are rooted more in the Orient than the Occident. But not all Muslims are Arabs, and not all Jews who follow the same rites and customs as Jews from the Orient lived in Muslim countries.

Jews who came from Spain after being expelled by Muslims in 1148 (when Maimonides was given a choice of conversion, death or exile) and after the Christian expulsion in 1492 were called Sepharadim. From the word for Spain in Hebrew—Sepharad. They resettled mainly (but not exclusively) in Muslim countries. But there were many Jews living the Orient who had never been to Spain and could trace their lineage in the East back long before the Spanish Jews. Jews had been living in Yemen, Afghanistan, Persia, and Baghdad for over 2,500 years. Thus another term evolved, that of Sephardim (minus the second letter "a").

To confuse matters, when Hasidism, a European Ashkenazi movement, emerged in the 18th century, it adopted the mystical style of prayer attributed to Rabbi Yitzchak Luria who lived in Safed and called it Nusah Sefard, the Oriental style. Although there was nothing Oriental about those who used it!

In 1948 there was a massive expulsion of Jews from Arab and other Muslim lands. Most ended up in Israel where they were described as Mizrahim, easterners, which carried the reek of discrimination and condescension. They were treated as second-class citizens. Israel was poor at the time, struggling to survive. It had to absorb nearly a million refugees. Many were penniless and lacked the skills and language to adapt. Their conditions were rudimentary and their opportunities meagre. The left-wing, socialist, secular Jews who dominated government and society for the first 30 years of the state regarded the poorer more traditional Mizrahim as inferior. To be fair, they also treated the Germans, the Yekkes, with disdain and every other immigrant community that came after them.

The popular attitudes towards Jews from the Orient belied important distinctions. Some Sephardi communities were more influenced by modernity than others. Some were richer, more multilingual, and assimilated. Many identified with Muslim national aspirations, particularly in North Africa. Some Mizrahim belonged to marxist and socialist movements. And nowadays they can be found supporting the Opposition in Israel—left-wing values and Western culture more than Oriental. Even in the ranks of the anti-Zionists. Most ironic of all, many Mizrahim, Easterners, actually came from the Maghreb, which is North Africa and much further West than the vast majority of Ashkenazim, who came from Middle and Eastern Europe.

Yet I have met Persians who resent being called Mizrahim, while at the same time claiming Spanish descent. Everyone seems to have a different perspective.

Things began to change under Menahem Begin's leadership. Although Ashkenazi, he had inordinate respect for the very traditionalist Sephardim. In Israel under the ideological left, it was rare to see anyone in government employ wearing a kipa or other outward sign of religiosity. Under Begin, the pendulum began to swing the other way. Which is one explanation as to why nowadays the Mizrahi vote is overwhelmingly right instead of left. And now the marriage rate between the two communities runs at nearly 40%.

The overwhelming mood of Israeli life has nowadays shifted firmly eastwards in terms of music, dance, and culture. Even religion. There was no Reform movement in the Sephardi world. Which explains the dissonance in Israel between Israeli Judaism and American. Mizrahim tend to be more tolerant of religious laxity while being very loyal to tradition. In Israel to this day it is the Ashkenazi Haredim who are most prejudiced, towards non-religious Jews and particularly towards Sephardi Jews often limiting the number of their students they accept into their schools or simply segregating them.

The late, great Sephardi authority, Rav Ovadia Yosef, did his best for Sephardi pride. He used to campaign against Sephardi students imitating the styles and dress of the Ashkenazi Haredi world. Even establishing a Sephardi Haredi alternative party to the Vuzvuzim, as Ashkenazis were called (from the Ashkenazi Yiddish speakers who always said "Vuss? Vuss?" (What? What?)) In response to Ashkenazi the derogatory term for Sephardim, "Frank" (Crusaders, French Speakers, or Francos—no one agrees!!!). Sadly, he failed. Even his own sons imitated the Ashkenazi rabbis in dress and regressive attitudes. They mistakenly thought they would be more respected if they did.

It is because of this negativity that I prefer not to use the term Mizrahi (which in my youth stood and still does in some circles, for the Religious Zionists) and say Sephardim instead. After all, many Sephardim like to append to their names the letters ST. Sephardi Tahor. Pure Sephardi. The aristocrats. As indeed they were for most of the past 2,000 years. While medieval Europe was barbaric, much (not all) of the Sephardi world was in fact superior in every way to the Ashkenazi.

It is often said that Sephardi Jews did not experience or lose family members to the Holocaust. And most did not. Nevertheless, there were a significant

number of Jews from Greece, the Balkans, and other areas invaded by the Nazis who did indeed perish in Auschwitz. No community had exclusivity of suffering.

Israel is a variegated, complex, and multifaceted society. It is often said that Sephardim are extremely anti-Muslim for the way they were humiliated and then expelled. Others say that the Sephardim lived far better under Islam than Christianity. They can point, perhaps controversially, to brief windows of "Convivencia", of living peacefully, if tolerated. Some say that Sephardi rabbis get on better with imams and Ashkenazi rabbis with priests. And I have also heard the opposite. There are just as many openminded tolerant Jews of all backgrounds and identities as there are xenophobic, narrow-minded, and anti-goy.

I just wish we Jews were more tolerant of our own differences and got on better with each other. As the late Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits used to say, "Jews are the same as everyone else, except more so."