

Names

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

I spend a fair amount of time with Persian Jews here in New York. I really enjoy their warmth and joie de vivre. But the quickest way to offend them is to suggest that they are Sephardi! Actually, you'd get a similar reaction if you suggested that a Muslim Iranian was an Arab!

The Persian Jewish community existed long before Spanish Jewry, which is the etymological origin of the term "Sepharadi". The Jews of Persia have been in the same place since 586 BCE, longer than any other Jewish community. But after the great expulsion of Spanish Jewry, and the consequent wave of Iberian Jews returning east, the term "Sepharadi" ("Spanish") came to refer not just to Jews of Spanish origin, but rather loosely to apply to those living mainly under Islam who follow the ancient liturgy and rabbinical influence of Mesopotamia and eastwards. As opposed to the term used for Europe, which came to be known as "Ashkenaz", which originally referred only to Jews from the Rhineland but then incorporated all European Jews, even if they came from beyond the Caucasus. To complicate matters even more, when Eastern European Chasidic Jews turned adopted the ecstatic Lurianic version of mysticism, they called their style of prayer Nusach Sefard!

Ethnic Italian Jews started in Israel, moved to Rome, and thought themselves neither Ashkenazi nor Sephardi. And those Iberian Jews who migrated to Ashkenazi lands were called "Spanish and Portuguese". Nowadays in Israel the term "Mizrachi" refers to Jews from Oriental (Sephardi?) countries. But my late father used to be the president of the Mizrachi Movement in the UK when it meant religious Zionist (he resigned when it went into politics in Israel).

Words and names change in their usages and connotations over time. But we do seem to need names and categories and we get so easily offended by them. Charedi Jews are upset if called ultra-Orthodox. Orthodox Jews who appreciate aspects of Western culture detest being called Modern Orthodox, and many other Orthodox don't like to be called Orthodox altogether because it has different connotations (like Russian Orthodox).

Amongst the faithful, there are all the different Chasidic sects who battle to preserve their special identities and shut out anyone who does not conform to their specific rituals and dress. The Charedi world itself is full of Yiddish distinctions, a Sheyner Yid (a fine Jew), an Ergerer Yid (a distinguished Jew), a Chasidishe Yid, a Heimisher Yid (One of Us) and of course a Kosher Yid. All this is without venturing towards Egalitarian, Conservative, Masorti, Masorati (yes, they are different), Reconstructionist, Reform, Liberal, Secular, Cultural, Intellectual, and whatever.

But, you know, I really detest these labels. They are divisive and destructive. Nowhere does Moses differentiate between good Jews, religious Jews, or common and garden Jews. We are all in it together. Some are more

into it and some less.

Indeed are we Jews, Israelites, Hebrews, Judeans, or Kikes? Does it make any difference? Are we a People, a Nation, an Ethnic Group or a Religion? And let us not go down the "race" path, because I'd love to know what racial characteristics all Jews have in common, even with all this genetic stuff that we have in common (with rats and vegetables as well). A lot of people are playing with genetic traces, trying to prove we are all descended somehow from Moses. Meanwhile post-Zionist secular theoreticians like Shlomo Sand (and Palestinian rejectionists, of course) are trying to persuade us that we are no more than a rag tag collection of converts and have no connection with Abraham or the Land of Israel. Which only confirms my view that academics will say almost anything to get published.

My Judaism is an existential, phenomenological expression of me, my specific background, education, and experiences. If people think they can categorize me, or think I care, they are sadly mistaken. Though it is true I am British by citizenship, American by residence, Jerusalemite by passion and Jewish by soul.

Surnames are relatively late inventions. As the European population began to expand in medieval times, and there were too many Johns and Williams, they needed to add some other characteristic, like occupation, features, or location to distinguish. And women, in the main, were simply "the wife of". Jews had their own system, Moshe or Miriam, the son or daughter of. Surnames caught on very slowly, and in the end it was non-Jewish legislation that forced the issue. Then Jews adopted names based on location, occupation, or characteristic. It was the same under Islam and in some countries such as Iran; Jews were only forced to take on surnames in the twentieth century. So you can tell an Iranian surname from, say, a Moroccan or a Syrian name a mile away. No Syrian is going to be named Kashani and no Iranian, Aleppo. A Cohensedgh will be a Cohen from Iran, while a Dwek will be from Damascus.

So why do Iranians not like to be called Sephardim? It has to do with discrimination. Jews from Poland, Lithuania, Ukraine, Hungary, and Germany all looked down on each other and thought they were better than the others. When different groups of secular Jews started arriving in Israel in the nineteenth and twentieth century (religious groups had always been coming to Israel whenever the political climate allowed it) each group made the next one suffer. A bit like schoolchildren, the newcomers are picked on, so when they get to the top they make the next generation suffer the way they did.

The Russian socialists came first. By that I mean amongst the secular pioneers, for pious Jews had been coming all the time when they could. The Russians discriminated against the Germans, who in turn took it out on the massive immigration from Arab lands in 1950, who eventually turned on the post-Glasnost Russians, who felt better taking it out on the Ethiopians. It wasn't until Menachem Begin that Sephardi pride began to turn the tables on Ashkenazi arrogance. There still does exist a layer of prejudice and discrimination against Sephardim in some small, petty minded and usually corrupt sectors of Israeli society, which is precisely why Iranians do not want to be called Sephardi. As if anyone else makes such fine distinctions.

But here's the rub. Many Iranians discriminate against other Iranians. Is a Mashadi better than a Kashani, and is a Teherani just an out and out assimilationist?

I am often asked about marrying across these internal Jewish ethnic varieties. And I always say that if you have Torah in common, the rest is secondary. But it's certainly good for the genes!