The theme of longing and belonging—making yourself at home in a new country while yearning for and holding onto the memories of your place of birth—is present in immigrant communities throughout the world. This is especially true among Diaspora Jews, who have a spiritual longing for Israel. In Psalm 137, Jews declare, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither.” Yet Diaspora Jews have an additional longing for their place of birth—their country outside of the spiritual homeland of Israel.

Since the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, Jews have lived all over the world. Sephardic Jews developed communities on the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) around 1000 CE, creating their community’s distinct identity and Judeo-Spanish language, called Ladino. With the Alhambra Decree and the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition in the late fifteenth century, many Sephardic Jews escaped Europe and made their home in what was then the Ottoman Empire (the Middle East, North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Balkans). These Jewish communities practice Sephardic customs, laws, and liturgy imparted to them by the Iberian Jewish exiles over the last few centuries. As I am writing this introduction today, it is all over the news that Spain and Portugal are offering Sephardic Jews dual citizenship in order to make amends for the Inquisition. It is estimated that approximately 3.5 million Jews could potentially apply for Spanish and Portuguese passports—proving it is never too late to right your wrongs, even if it is five hundred years later.

Although often confused with Sephardic Jews (because they share many similar religious customs), Mizrahi Jews come from Middle Eastern ancestry; they do not trace their lineage to the Iberian Peninsula. The earliest Mizrahi
communities date from Late Antiquity, and the oldest and largest of these communities comes from modern-day Iran (Persia), Iraq (Babylonia), and Yemen. With the establishment of the State of Israel and the subsequent 1948 Arab-Israeli War, most Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews were either expelled by their Arab rulers or chose to leave. Most live in Israel or the United States. The mass migration of Iranian Jews from Iran occurred with the 1979 Islamic Revolution, during which a majority of Iranian Jews settled in Southern California or New York.

Although the first Jews who settled in America in the mid-seventeenth century were of Sephardic ancestry, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that large-scale immigration of Jews to America occurred, most of whom were of Ashkenazi descent. Sephardic ascendancy faded, and Ashkenazi customs and practices became, and still are, the dominant Jewish tradition in America. Unfortunately, Sephardi and Mizrahi history, customs, and traditions were often absent from portrayals of American Jewry. American Jewish cuisine, art, literature, and the study and portrayal of American Jewry in academia, movies, and television were from an Ashkenazi perspective. Matzo ball soup, gefilte fish, and the Yiddish language were just as foreign to the Sephardi/Mizrahi Jew as they were to the non-Jew in America. As Elaine Lindheim, whose interview appears in “The Maurice Amado Foundation” in this volume, stated, “We are Sephardic . . . we came from the olive oil rather than chicken fat parts of the world.”

As a college and graduate student in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, I do not remember taking a Jewish Studies course in which Sephardic/Mizrahi traditions, history, and culture were discussed; they were always a side note in our readings. The courses that focused on the Jewish community in the United States emphasized the Ashkenazi community. Any course looking at Jewish history mainly focused on Ashkenazi history. We learned about the shtetls of Poland, but we never learned about the mahallehs of Tehran or the mellahs of Casablanca.

This Annual fills the gap within the America Jewish narrative by focusing on the Sephardic and Mizrahi experience in America. Sephardic and Mizrahi Studies is no longer an afterthought in academia, thanks to organizations such as the Maurice Amado Foundation, which has supported the study of Sephardic Jewish history, culture, and heritage over the past half century. The Foundation was among the first to recognize the significance of supporting Sephardic Jewish scholarship and education. I was lucky to conduct an interview with Elaine Lindheim, one of the directors of the Foundation, and Sam Tarica, former president and adviser, in order to discuss the Foundation’s
history, goals, and interests, and to learn a bit about Maurice Amado himself. The transcription of the interview can be found at the beginning of this volume.

When reaching out to our contributors for this volume, we simply asked them to write about any aspect of Sephardic and Mizrahi life in America. Our contributors took many different approaches to their chapters. Some took an ethnographic approach, such as scholar Molly FitzMorris, whose article profiles three women, all native speakers of Judeo-Spanish, or Ladino, currently living in or near Seattle, Washington. FitzMorris’s interviews and surveys demonstrate that speakers’ proficiency in a language and their perceived proficiency do not always correlate.

Scholar Bryan Kirschen writes about the sociolinguistic history and diglossia of the Sephardim in the United States. He examines periodicals based in Los Angeles and New York City in order to describe the internal structure of these cities’ Sephardic communities, inter-city correspondence, and problems the Sephardim faced due to linguistic expectations of assimilation and acculturation into the greater multilingual landscape of the United States.

Other contributors explore the meaning of Sephardi and Mizrahi identity in America. Joyce Zonana reflects on what it means to have an Arab Jewish identity through her own personal story while examining Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff’s neglected 1951 Egyptian Jewish American autobiographical novel Jacob’s Ladder. Devin E. Naar refutes the idea that a century ago, Ladino-speaking Jews in the United States automatically described themselves as “Sephardim”; he writes that the term “Sephardi,” as a self-imposed, collective, “ethnic” designation, had to be learned and naturalized, and its parameters defined and negotiated in the new context of the United States and in conversation with discussions about Sephardic identity around the world. Scholar Aviva Ben-Ur examines Sephardi/Ashkenazi tensions beginning in late-seventeenth-century America and the problem of co-ethnic recognition failure. She writes that Jewish tradition prescribes that Jews rescue each other from affliction, yet when the factor of physical remoteness between two communities was eliminated (as it was in America), these time-honored values frequently dissipated.

We are excited to include essays from writers discussing their own personal stories of being a Mizrahi or Sephardi Jew in America. David Suissa illuminates his memories of Casablanca and the beauty of the Arab melodies that infiltrated and influenced the Moroccan synagogues. He writes, “Arab melodies were not written by people shivering in a Polish winter. They were written by romantics who saw the eternity of the sand . . . and dreamed.” Suissa discusses the Jewish idea of exile, describing the double exile he feels in America:
exile from his childhood memories of Morocco and the biblical exile. Yet he writes that, ironically, it is in the pluralistic landscape of America, where unlike his ancestors in Morocco, he is not dealing with antisemitism, that his Jewish identity has been strengthened.

Writer Gina Nahai tells us the story of her sassy and independent grandmother in Iran and juxtaposes it with the realities of Iranian Jews escaping to Los Angeles. Just as Aviva Ben-Ur discusses in her essay, Nahai reflects on the tensions between the Iranian and Ashkenazi communities in Los Angeles and the importance of Mizrahi Jews holding on to their identity and culture while living in America.

As a way of preserving Iranian identity, architect and art gallery owner Shulamit Nazarian’s essay discusses Iranian Jewish art today and the cultural legacy it preserves and passes down. Nazarian provides an honest and raw narrative of how her life in Iran, her divorce in Los Angeles, and her journey as a newly single Iranian Jewish woman led her to find her independence and her voice, giving her the strength to turn her passion for art, architecture, and design into a successful gallery, Shulamit Gallery, in Venice, California. The purpose of her gallery is to provide a venue where she can expose people to contemporary Iranian, Israeli, and Middle Eastern culture, engaging locals through interdisciplinary exhibitions and programming that features artwork by emerging and established artists. A major theme in her artists’ work is the exploration of hybrid and multilayered identities.

Finally, Rabbi Daniel Bouskila provides a personal meditation on Sephardic Judaism. As a pulpit rabbi for seventeen years and as the International Director of the Sephardic Educational Center in Los Angeles, Bouskila describes the Sephardic traditional home he was raised in as being without the denominational terms American Judaism ascribes to. Denominational differences (Ultra-Orthodox, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform) did not exist within the Sephardic and Mizrahi traditions. Thus, Bouskila writes, his family celebrations were full of Judeo-Arabic poetry and prayers, traditions, and culinary magic, and void of divisive denominational affiliations. Bouskila laments that non-denominational Sephardic Judaism in America has been influenced by Lithuanian Orthodoxy, which is alien to classic Sephardic tradition, believing it “not religious enough.” Thus, he started a Sephardic rabbinical program that would revive the classic Sephardic tradition with the goal of educating and training rabbinical leaders who will revive the authentic voice of Sephardic Judaism in communities all over the world.
The dominance of Ashkenazi denominational Judaism is seen among Iranian Jews in Los Angeles who have appropriated the different forms of Judaism available to them in the pluralistic American Jewish landscape. Only in America would you see an Iranian Jew stepping into a Chabad synagogue, dressed like a Lubavitch Jew from Eastern Europe. As a scholar who writes about the Iranian Jewish American community, I have seen how different denominational ties have caused discord in the community. Iranian Jews describe themselves as practicing “traditional” Judaism in Iran, and now within the same family, someone only eats Glatt Kosher while another sends her child to a Reform Jewish Day school. This is the inevitable part of being a Jew in America. No longer are Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews dealing with antisemitism and second-class citizenship of their homeland, but now they must cope with how to preserve and navigate their culture, language, history, and heritage of their traditions while dealing with assimilation—not only into a dominant American society, but into a dominant Ashkenazi society.

I am grateful to Bruce Zuckerman, the former Director of the Casden Institute; Steve Ross, the current Director of the Casden Institute; and Lisa Ansell, the Casden Institute’s Associate Director, for recognizing the significance of the Sephardic and Mizrahi community in America and dedicating this volume to their story. Bruce, you have worked tirelessly for the Casden Institute and we are so grateful for your guidance and vision. The legacy you leave is tremendous and the future achievements of the Institute are a result of your devotion dedication over the past ten years. Steve and Lisa, I extend my heartfelt gratitude for your counseling, mentoring, and leadership. You are a wealth of knowledge and full of amazing ideas. I am honored and humbled to be working with such amazing scholars as the three of you and I am grateful for the opportunity to work on such an important volume. May we continue to work together on such novel and groundbreaking projects in the future! Finally, I would like to thank Alan Casden, whose generosity has made it possible to have these significant book series and whose vision and commitment to Jewish life in America created the Institute. It is due to Alan’s generosity and commitment to the advancement of Jewish Studies at USC that makes such novel scholarship possible.

In closing, I would like to dedicate this volume to Mark Tarica, Sam Tarica and to their families. Your steadfast friendship and support of our initiatives and ideas over the years have given us the confidence and resources to develop one of the premier institutes of Jewish scholarship in Los Angeles. We are eternally grateful for the guidance and wisdom you have shown us throughout
this journey. You embody the very best of the Sephardic tradition upon which this volume is based as did Louis and Betty Angel of blessed memory to whom this volume is dedicated as well.