Diasporic Reunions: Sephardi/Ashkenazi Tensions in Historical Perspective

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Tradition prescribes that Jews rescue other Jews from affliction, underscored by the halakhic concept *pidyon shvu‘im* (redemption of captives) and the Talmudic dictum *kol Israel arevim ze-ba-ze*, which teaches that every Jew is responsible for the other.1 Yet, when the factor of physical remoteness between two communities was eliminated, these time-honored values frequently dissipated. As one eminent historian quipped, “*ahavat Israel* is inversely proportionate to distance.”2

Ethnic tensions among Jews are a transnational, diachronic phenomenon, amply documented by Jews as well as by outside observers. Scholars of the American Jewish experience have discussed such conflicts at length and have usually understood them as one defining feature of a particular historiographical period. During the so-called Sephardi era of American Jewish immigration (1654–1840), we are told, Sephardim lorded it over their Germanic coreligionists, sometimes refusing to marry them, while beginning in the 1880s Germanic Jews gave their Eastern European brethren the cold shoulder, labeling them “wild Russians” and “uncouth Asiatics,” until all groups seamlessly mingled following restrictive quotas of the 1920s that largely barred further Jewish immigration.3 But historians have not yet examined in a comparative context ethnic tensions among the world’s Jewish communities, nor are they accustomed to applying sociological, psychological, or anthropological tools to deepen understanding of these conflicts. This article, inspired by social scientific approaches, reveals two distinct clashes among Jewish ethnic groups.
that appear consistent across space and time: what I call “ranked stratification,” where issues of superiority and inferiority inform the discourse, and “co-ethnic recognition failure,” where ethnic belonging is denied.

Both historians and sociologists recognize that ethnic belonging is constantly negotiated and that a group’s self- and ascribed definitions are contextual and transform through time. Particularly in the case of Jews, whose variegated ethnic and religious identities overlap and are exceedingly complex, an explanation of terminology is imperative. Our frame of reference begins in the late seventeenth century with two groups conventionally known as “Sephardim” and “Ashkenazim.” In recent centuries, Ashkenazim have been understood to comprise two subgroups, both of whom ultimately trace their roots back to “Ashkenaz,” the medieval Hebrew word for “Germany”: Jews of Central European or Germanic origin, who spoke German or a western form of Yiddish, and Eastern European Jews, who typically spoke Yiddish or Slavic languages. Sephardim—from the medieval Hebrew word for “Spain”—are also divided into two subcategories, both of them of remote Iberian origin: “Western Sephardim,” who after their exile from the Peninsula settled in various lands in the West, including the Americas, and spoke Portuguese and Spanish; and “Eastern Sephardim,” Jews who settled in the Ottoman Empire (Turkey and the Balkans) and mainly spoke Ladino, a Jewish language that fused early modern Castilian with Turkish, Greek, Arabic, Aramaic, and French, and developed in the East after the exile from Iberia. A third group, much larger than both of these two Iberian-origin subgroups combined, is made up of Jews indigenous to Arab and Muslim lands. These Jews had no Iberian origins and largely spoke Arabic and Persian languages. Since World War I, these ancient communities, indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, have increasingly been subsumed under the category of “Sephardim,” itself a process of diasporic Jewish reunion, as we shall see. However, for the sake of geographical and linguistic accuracy, this third group will be referred to in a separate category—for lack of a better term, as Mizrahim (the Hebrew term for “Easterners”).

BROTHERS AND STRANGERS
Ranked stratification among ethnic groups is perhaps inevitable. Psychologists have found that “individuals who identify strongly with a group will be particularly motivated to establish its positive distinctiveness vis-à-vis other groups”
(Federico and Levin 52). Phrased another way, intense ethnic identity often goes hand in hand with self-exaltation contingent on the disparagement of the other. The gulf separating Iberian-origin from Ashkenazi Jews was in part informed by a variety of ethnic superiority myths that traced the ancestry of the former group to King David and the Judean Kingdom, and more recently to the glories of “Golden Age Spain,” a period from roughly the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, when Jews in the Muslim Iberian Peninsula supposedly attained a high degree of social integration without losing their religious allegiance. By contrast, Ashkenazim seem to have not cultivated parallel ethnic superiority myths, although some individuals did tout lineage to great Jewish scholars or ancient mystical traditions. Historian David Nirenberg suggests that the Sephardi obsession with noble roots arose after the persecutions of 1391, when thousands of Iberian Jews were forcibly converted to Christianity, thereby blurring the distinctions between the Peninsula’s ethno-religious communities. Claims to aristocratic lineage—reinforced by armorial bearings and often-fabricated family trees—helped individuals and families distinguish themselves from Christian neophytes. The absence of parallel nobility myths among Ashkenazim may help to explain why Sephardi hegemony continued in the Americas even after Ashkenazim became the numerically dominant Jewish population.

Demands of the “host society” that Jews adopt Westernization is a second factor that exacerbated intra-group tensions during the process of diasporic reunion. The east-west divide among Ashkenazim did not arise until the first half of the nineteenth century when emerging nation states in Western and Central Europe, implementing programs of Emancipation, demanded that Jews wholly identify as French-, German-, or Englishmen by discarding their linguistic and sartorial distinctions and shrinking their Jewishness into the category of religion, devoid of any sense of peoplehood or yearning for the Land of Israel. By the mid-nineteenth century, once the majority of urban, Central European Jews had left the “ghetto” and acquired middle class status, they re-identified as “German Jews” and labeled their unemancipated brethren as “Ostjuden” (Eastern Jews) or those of “Halb-Asien” (Half Asia) (Aschheim 3, 31). With the mass westward immigration of Eastern European Jews in the 1880s, these latter began to fully embody their two functions, as both threat and foil to German Jews (Aschheim 12).

American Jews of Iberian origin, whose ancestors in Spain and Portugal had been forcibly converted to Christianity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and were thus fully conversant with Western society by the time
they abandoned the Peninsula and reverted to Judaism, underwent similar embarrassment and redefinition during the mass influx of Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim from the disintegrating Ottoman Empire beginning in the early 1900s. This encounter, most notably developed in the United States of America, brought into currency the dichotomous terms “Old” or “Western Sephardim,” versus “New” or “Oriental Jews,” and eventually “Eastern Jews” or “Eastern Sephardim.” Both diasporic reunions—those among “Ashkenazi” Jews and those among Jews newly conglomerated together as “Sephardim”—were informed by the “modernization of Jewish life and consciousness” (Aschheim 3) perhaps better described as modern Westernization.

The approach of German Ashkenazi and Western Sephardi Jews toward their “Eastern” coreligionists was undeniably philanthropic. But this benevolence was deeply informed by a double-pronged goal: to “deflect from themselves political and popular opinion critical of immigration and the immigrant and to set a standard of conduct for the immigrants that would effectively neutralize nativist sentiment” (Glazier, *Dispersing the Ghetto* 9). Historian Steven Aschheim’s description of encounters between the two Ashkenazi groups in Central Europe also holds true for Western and Eastern Sephardim in America: they were at once “brothers and strangers.”

We can locate some parallels to the Sephardi/Ashkenazi fissure in the Dutch American colonies. In Suriname, where Portuguese-speaking Jews founded an autonomous Jewish community in the 1660s, friction arose after Ashkenazim began to immigrate in the late seventeenth century. Initially, they prayed alongside their Portuguese coreligionists and adopted their rituals and Hebrew pronunciation. Joint worship under Portuguese Jewish cultural and political hegemony had also been the norm in Recife, Brazil, where an open, largely Iberian-origin community openly professed Judaism from the 1630s until the fall of the Dutch colony to the Portuguese in 1654 (Sarna 12). Recife’s community was too short-lived to experience the full ramifications of diasporic reunion. But in Suriname, once Ashkenazim had reached a critical mass in the 1710s, cracks in the blended community began to appear. Portuguese Jewish leaders designated a separate house of prayer for Ashkenazim, even as the latter remained under the legal jurisdiction of the Portuguese Jewish court. Continuing religious disagreements led Portuguese Jewish leaders in 1724 to petition the colonial governor for an official separation, which was formalized in 1734, resulting in the formation of an independent Ashkenazi court of Jewish law (Vink 196–97). Anti-Ashkenazi animosity persisted for generations. Portuguese Jews perceived German Jews as more assimilable to
Portuguese Jewish culture than Jews of Polish origin, but both Central and Eastern European Jews were vulnerable to disparaging remarks. In the 1780s, Surinamese Portuguese Jewish leader David Cohen Nassy sneered at his coreligionists’ “ridiculous manners,” “superstitions,” and “bigotry,” which he thought were exacerbated by the influx of Polish Jews (Nassy part 1:83, 85). That these internecine prejudices could prevail in a colony, ninety percent of whose population was enslaved and of African origin, speaks to both the insularity of the Jewish community from white Christian society and the power of intra-Jewish conflicts to override the ascriptive identity that would ultimately recast Portuguese Jews and Ashkenazim as simply “Jews.”

Over a century later, similar dilemmas developed in Britain’s overseas colonies, where Jews of primarily Iraqi origin and Ashkenazim from various European lands relocated in the late nineteenth century. Arnold Wright, at the turn of the next century, noted that in Singapore there “was always a certain element of antipathy between the Ashkenasi and the Sephardi Jews which found expression more often in the first generation than in the second. . . . The Baghdad Jews have two synagogues which they frequent, the German [or Ashkenasi] Jew keeping himself strictly apart and being as often as not rationalist” (Nathan 58). Memoirist Eze Nathan, who grew up in the Singaporean Arabic-speaking community during the first half of the twentieth century, found Wright’s account “only slightly exaggerated” (58). These tensions found similar parallels during the same era in cosmopolitan Shanghai, where long-standing Baghdadi-origin Jews clashed with Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe and Nazi Germany (Ristaino 23–25).

Rifts also developed in Australia, whose native-born Jewish community was less than half of one percent of the total population in the early 1900s. These Jews, primarily of Ashkenazi origins, had limited observance or knowledge of Jewish traditions, identified as Australians (or British subjects) of the Jewish faith, and saw themselves as part of Australian society in every realm except religion (Samra 106–07). They actively opposed the immigration of 2,000 Eastern European refugees in the 1920s, balking at their Yiddish and strong Jewish observance. Like the nineteenth-century “German” Jews of America, Australian Jews feared their own status in broader society would fall. Their rabbis and secular Jewish leaders supported restrictive immigration, petitioning the government in the 1920s to stem the influx because, they claimed, it would pull the existing Jewish community into destitution. With the rise of Nazi power the following decade, the Australian Jewish community’s German Jewish Relief Fund raised £50,000, even as they attempted to bar Jewish refugees from
entering the country. The Australian Jewish Welfare Society, fearing an intensification of anti-Semitism locally, advocated that no more than six Jewish exiles enter on any ship, each group to be accompanied by an English teacher (Samra 107–08). Nonetheless, it should be noted that Australia’s acceptance of 15,000 German refugees over three years was relatively speaking the most generous policy of any nation (Samra 109).

During the mid-twentieth century, a new subethnic group further diversified Australia’s Jewish community. Its members, the majority of whom had been dislodged from their homes in India, Burma, Singapore, and Shanghai during World War II, and shared distant Iraqi origins, founded The New South Wales Hebrew Association in 1953 (Aaron 55). The selection of an ethnically vague name suggests not only uncertainty about collective self-definition, but also a reluctance to choose an identity associated with things “Oriental” (Samra 267). Three years later, amidst internal dissension, the group re-launched itself as the “New South Wales Association of Sephardim.” A local Ashkenazi rabbi and advocate had urged them to do so since [sic]: “The fact is all of you are Sephardim and the Sephardim have a proud heritage” (Samra 268).

Anthropologist Myer Samra argues that the “imputation of Spanish genetic origins” served multiple purposes: the established Australian Jews were familiar with what a Sephardi (but not an Iraqi or Mizrahi) Jew was; it countered the inferiority of Oriental self- and ascribed-identity; and it facilitated Jewish immigration during the White Australia Policy, which barred non-whites, including initially most Mizrahim, from settling in the country (Samra 314). By the mid-1980s, Myer observes, the “need to stress Spanishness” had declined in the Australian Jewish community, in part as a result of their acculturation to normative Jewish identity, in part due to the rescinding of the White Australia Policy in 1973 (Samra 317; Palfreeman 349).

Australia is a particularly interesting case since the recency of internal Jewish friction allows us to examine the process of identity amalgamation and separation as it was taking place (Samra 36). The striking parallels to the contemporaneous US and Israeli Jewish communities confirm a worldwide trend beginning in World War I whereby Jews (of Iberian origin and Mizrahi Jews native to Arab and Muslim lands) banded together with other non-Ashkenazi Jews under the “Sephardi” banner in order to achieve political power, visibility, and acceptance in the larger, normative Jewish community. In the United States, a parallel decision was ultimately made to politically unite—under the “Sephardi” banner—all non-Ashkenazi Jews, who in the process were
implicitly proffered Iberian ancestry, even when it had never existed, as in the case of Iranian, Ethiopian, or Bukharian Jews (Behar). As we have seen, similar dynamics of confrontation and re-definition were repeated whenever and wherever two disparate and sufficiently sizeable Jewish diasporic groups were brought together in the same locale after generations of no direct contact. Their initial differences included geographical origin and language, and consequent variations in cultural and religious background, profession, and formal education. Often, as in the case of native-born Jews and immigrants, class exacerbated these tensions. Each of these diasporic reunions was characterized by a reluctance or refusal to participate together in religious rites or communal matters, to intra-marry, to identify as members of the same group, and in some cases to support immigration, all of which coexisted with the impulse of philanthropy. Sometimes these group relations displayed an arc beginning with coexistence, culminating in formal separation, and ending with mingling as either the group boundaries blurred through acculturation and intramarrriage (matrimonial unions among Jews of difference ethnicities) or, as in the case of Suriname, when the colonial authorities brought a formal end to separatist practices (Vink 202–04). In other cases, such as “Ashkenazi” versus “Sephardi/Mizrahi” relations in Australia and the United States, the impediments against a unified Jewish community have not yet been fully dissolved.

CO-ETHNIC RECOGNITION FAILURE:
THE DENIAL OF SHARED IDENTITY
One overlooked aspect of intra-ethnic Jewish tensions in modern times, much more puzzling than any antipathy heretofore discussed, is co-ethnic recognition failure, one person’s denial of a group member’s common ethnicity. In contrast to the disparaging “we are Israelites, they are Jews” mantra of the German-Eastern European encounter (Wise), or “we are Sephardim, they are Oriental Jews” (Papo 52, 54) impulse in Western-Eastern Sephardi relations, the cause of this failure to include is genuine ignorance of Jewish cultural variation. Co-ethnic recognition failure is a category of “experience-distance,” intended for use by social analysts, in distinction to “native, folk or lay categories,” which are “categories of everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors” (Cooper and Brubaker 62). Phrased in a simpler way, “co-ethnic recognition failure” is a somewhat awkward term
that obscures to non-specialists its immediately identifiable meaning. Yet the
concept of “failing to recognize” approximates the experience as retold by its
targets, who recalled not “being taken for Jews,” and not being “believed to be
Jews” (Gadol, “El rolo del jurnal ‘La Amerika’”).

Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews, who are the principle targets of this phe-
nomenon, have recorded their experiences in oral interviews, newspaper ar-
ticles, and memoirs over the course of the twentieth century, and continue to
do so. More recent targets are “Jews of Color,” who trace their non-Ashke-
nazi ancestry to conversion, inter- and intra-marriage, or adoption (Sanchez
9; Tobin; Kaye/Kantrowitz). Their testimonies suggest that many Ashkenazi
Jews are “generally unaware of Jewish multiculturalism” (Sanchez 17). As an-
thropologist Jack Glazier notes, co-ethnic recognition failure also underscores
the parochial self-awareness of Jews who assumed that only “Yiddish and its
associated cultural symbols defined Jewish identity” (Glazier, “Indianapolis
Sephardim” 31).

One early example dates to the tenure of Mayor William Jay Gaynor
(1909–13), when a number of Ashkenazi Jews of the Lower East Side, pro-
testing street disturbances and neighborhood disputes, petitioned him to re-
move the “Turks in our midst.” The main problem with the complaint was
that these “Turks” were actually fellow Jews. Upon learning of their mistake,
the Ashkenazim—primarily Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern European ori-
gin—withdrew the petition, deciding to settle the matter “among themselves”
(Thomas 200).8 Eastern Sephardi Jews, with their unfamiliar physiognomy,
Mediterranean tongues, and distinct religious and social customs baffled their
Ashkenazi brethren. One young Russian-born woman of New York City was
both captivated and confused by Jack, a young man of uncertain ethno-rel-
gious identity she had met at a ball in 1916 organized by a Ladino newspaper.
“At first glance,” Clara wrote, “I thought him Italian. The way he spoke, his
countenance and his gestures were like those of the Italians. But later, when
we began seeing each other, he swore to me that he is a Spanish-speaking Jew.”
Clara’s parents objected to the union because they did not believe that Jack was
indeed Jewish, forcing Clara to appeal to the newspaper editor to verify in print
“If it is possible, that a Jew who doesn’t speak Jewish, and doesn’t look Jewish,
can nevertheless have a Jewish soul” (“Tribuna Libera”).9

This problem of co-ethnic recognition failure propelled Bulgarian-born
Moise Gadol to launch the country’s first Ladino newspaper in 1910. The
Eastern Sephardi newcomers Gadol first met when he arrived in New York
described shared identity denial as their worst immigrant hardship (Gadol,
“El rolo del jurnal ‘La Amerika’”). With tears in their eyes, they related that when they presented themselves for employment, they were “not believed by the Ashkenazim to be Jews, except with very great efforts and with all sorts of explanations . . . ” (Gadol, “Por La Lingua”). Many Eastern Sephardi job seekers learned to arrive at Ashkenazi-owned establishments bearing copies of Gadol’s weekly La America in their hands, and were able to convince incredulous employers of their Jewish identity “by showing our newspaper with [its] Hebrew letters,” peppered with announcements from the Ashkenazi press (Gadol, “Por La Lingua”).

The multiple reports of this experience from a variety of sources—contemporaneous and reminiscent, Jewish and non-Jewish—make it clear that co-ethnic recognition failure was neither folkloric nor a case of social snobbery. Forged of genuine ignorance, it occurred in every place where Eastern Sephardim settled, including, aside from New York, in Atlanta, Baltimore, Chicago, Indianapolis, Los Angeles, and Seattle (Angel, “Sephardic Culture in America” 277 and La America 52; Dash 12; Ferris 166; Luria; Glaser 328; Glazier, “American Sephardim” 310; “Stigma” 51–52; and “Indianapolis Sephardim” 31–32; Ligier, “Chicago and Los Angeles Sephardic Communities” 80; Papo, Sephardim in Twentieth Century America 47; Stern, Sephardic Jewish Community 98–100 and “Ethnic Identity”; Sutton 23; Zenner 233–34). Even without full and detailed cognizance of the multiple cases experienced across the country, Gadol was a good enough journalist to recognize that his weekly “would not suffice to recount one part of this sad situation” (Gadol, “Por La Lingua”).

Jews of Arab lands, whose mass immigration began after the rise of the State of Israel, also confronted this irksome phenomenon. Both Nitza Druyan and Dina Dahbany-Miraglia document that Ashkenazim often failed to recognize Yemenite Jews as coreligionists and coethnics (Druyan; Dahbany-Miraglia, “American Yemenite Jews”). This denial of shared ethno-religious identity, however, carried with it a sharper racial sting. With their “dark skin” and “curly hair” (the terms are Dahbany’s), Yemenite Jews were frequently mistaken for gentle African Americans and resorted to strategies long familiar to the country’s black community. When seeking apartments in Jewish neighborhoods, Yemenite Jews would dispatch a lighter-skinned family member or friend in their stead. When soliciting employment, particularly before the 1960s, they sought “the mediation of a friend or a relative” (Dahbany-Miraglia, “American Yemenite Jews” 67). Yemenite Jews, with no Judeo-Arabic newspaper they might present to incredulous Ashkenazim as proof of their Jewishness, were forced to employ tactics traditionally used by many African Americans and
Hispanics in a racially discriminatory America. The denial by Ashkenazim of shared ethnicity with Eastern Sephardim (and more recently, with “Jews of Color”) reflects the racialist idea, which intensified in the nineteenth century, that one defining marker of Jewishness is phenotype.13

Sephardim and Mizrahim experienced the repercussions of co-ethnic recognition failure on many levels. On the one hand, the denial of shared ethnicity and religion was personally painful and frustrating to immigrants who had been born and raised as Jews, understood their Jewishness as a heritable—and thus an inalienable—identity, and were now being mistaken for non-Jews. Psychological studies suggest that “individuals require connectedness and belonging with others in order to function optimally,” and that “rejection and exclusion from social relationships . . . can lead to anxiety, negative affect and depressed self-esteem” (Pickett and Brewer 90), something Gadol seems to have fully understood. Ashkenazi rejection of Sephardim as potential marriage partners may have played a role in the high rates of intermarriage among first and second-generation Eastern Sephardim. According to estimates, unions between Eastern Sephardim and non-Jews in Seattle during the 1930s and early 1970s were four and three times as common, respectively, as marriages between Sephardim and Ashkenazim (Adatto 63, 64; Sitton 338).

Another unintended consequence of co-ethnic identity failure was unintentionally passing for other ethnic groups. In 1914, David de Sola Pool, spiritual leader of New York’s Congregation Shearith Israel, remarked that many Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim had not been included in Jewish immigration statistics “because they have been passed as Turks or Greeks, not being easily recognizable as Jews, either in name, language or physical appearance” (de Sola Pool 4, 11, 20). HIAS officials stationed at Ellis Island were qualified to deal with Eastern European Ashkenazim, but were not familiar with the languages or names of Mizrahi and Eastern Sephardi Jews. Thus, many or most of these Jews passed by Ashkenazi immigration officials unnoticed and did not receive the assistance to which they were entitled (Gadol, “La Nación”; Gadol, “El emportante raporto”). Until Eastern Sephardim were appointed as volunteer interpreters at Ellis Island, many others slipped through HIAS’s philanthropic cracks and were often turned back to their native lands.

Nevertheless, some Jewish immigrants embraced passing as an opportunity. As early as 1893, Eastern Sephardi Jews were asked to pose as indigenous (and implicitly Muslim) Middle Easterners at the Chicago World’s Fair. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that roughly four-fifths of the “inhabitants of the Turkish village on the Midway Plaisance at the Chicago Exposition were Jews,”
from merchants, clerks and actors, to servants, musicians, and dancing girls. Only when the “Streets of Constantinople” came to a virtual standstill on Yom Kippur was the charade exposed as a public secret (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 68). New York Sephardi leader Joseph Gedalecia, who had himself immigrated to the United States via Paris as “a Frenchman,” noted in 1914 that many Jewish immigrants native to Greece and other Mediterranean countries intentionally passed as non-Jewish (“Discussion”). Reminiscing on Sephardi communal affairs from his Los Angeles home in 1976, Albert J. Amateau claimed he knew “fifty or more” Sephardim who “changed their names and pretended they were anything but Jews,” one passing for a Christian Italo-Frenchman (Letter to Papo). Many Eastern Sephardim allegedly succumbed to the temptation to “pass” for business reasons, Amateau alleged, including the multi-millionaire Schinasi brothers of New York tobacco factory fame. This, however, did not prevent them from later embracing the Sephardi community as prominent leaders and philanthropists (Letter to Papo). This apparent relief at being excluded from or by a group highlights a recent finding that “social exclusion can sometimes be a positive experience.” Eastern Sephardim who actively embraced or willingly accepted a variety of non-Jewish Mediterranean identities are paradigmatic of the “self-expansion model,” whereby individuals seeking more benefits than their natal group provide and pursuing more desirable opportunities elsewhere, happily sever their ties (McLaughlin-Volpe et al. 126–27).

Co-ethnic recognition failure seems to have led some Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim to internalize the Ashkenazi image of them as non-Jews or “Turks.” American-born Ben Cohen, whose family had immigrated from Monastir in 1910, confessed: “We used to speak about the Jewish guys, and the Sephardics were different. Really strange” (Glazier, “Indianapolis Sephardim”; “American Sephardim” 309). An elderly Eastern Sephardi of Indianapolis interviewed in the 1980s recalled being warmly greeted at a recent party by many “Sephardics” and “even Jewish people” (Glazier, “Stigma” 51). Eastern Sephardim in Los Angeles also tended to identify as “Sephardic” and to reject the term Jewish as a self-referential (Stern, “Ethnic Identity” 136). The Ladino term for Eastern European Ashkenazim, “Yiddishim” (composed of the word “Yiddish,” a reference to both the language and Jewishness, and appended to the Hebrew plural suffix) (Benardete 35–36) reinforced the idea that Ashkenazim were the only authentic Jews. Syrian Jews were also complicit in reinforcing a model of “authentic” Jewishness. These immigrants referred to Eastern European Ashkenazim as “Jewish” or “Iddish.” A male Ashkenazi Jew was an “Iddshy,” while a female an “Iddshiyeh.” Syrian Jews referred (and still
refer) to themselves as “S-Ys,” the first two letters of “Syrian,” and nicknamed Ashkenazi Jews (of any background) as “J.W.s” or “J-Dubs,” from the first and last letters of the word “Jew” (Sutton 151; Marshall 46; Victory Bulletin passim; and personal observation). New York’s Syrian Jews used these terms unabashedly, constructing a world trifurcated into “Syrians” (meaning Syrian Jews), “Jews” (Ashkenazim), and “Gentiles” (Cohen 3). These ethnic terms, like the use of Ladino and Arabic words and phrases in English speech, undoubtedly cultivated an “‘in-group’ spirit,” as Joseph Sutton suggests (Sutton 151), but reveal much more. If the established group was Jewish, what was the immigrant, minority group? The origin of these monikers within immigrant Jewish communities suggests that Eastern Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in a part of their psyches assigned “true” Jewish identity to Ashkenazim, with the implicit negation of their own authentic Jewish belonging. An extreme example is the case of Yemenite Jewish immigrants who arrived in the United States after World War II and sometimes called each other shvartz and shvartz khaye, the derogatory Yiddish expressions for “nigger” (literally, “black”) and “nigger beast” (literally, “black beast”), respectively, terms they heard from the mouths of their Ashkenazi contemporaries (Dahbany-Miraglia, An Analysis of Ethnic Identity 179; “Acculturation and Assimilation” 130; and “On the Outside Looking In” [3], [4] and [5]). Here again a Jewish subgroup internalized the majority group’s parochial—and in this case racist—perception. As with ranked stratification, co-ethnic recognition failure in Jewish immigrant communities appears to be a transnational phenomenon. In 1920s Argentina, when an Ashkenazi woman wed a Syrian Jew, her family “suspected that she was involved in an exogamic relationship. The groom’s knowledge of Hebrew prayers helped convince them that they were not giving their blessing to a ‘mixed’ marriage” (Klich 19–20). Ashkenazi denial of the Jewishness of Eastern Sephardim and Mizrahim was among the longest-lived of immigrant memories, perhaps because it threatened the most crucial aspects of a newcomer’s adjustment: collective identity, livelihood, and love.

Yet, anecdotal evidence suggests that this failure to recognize group belonging was not exclusively a function of a hegemonic Ashkenazi majority interacting with an Eastern Sephardi or Mizrahi minority. Aschheim found that during World War I, many Eastern European Jews were apparently unconvinced that German Jewish soldiers were fellow Jews (250). José Estrugo, an Ottoman-born Sephardi who settled in Los Angeles in 1920, noted that Ashkenazim who immigrated to the Anatolian Peninsula in early 1900s were not believed to be Jews, since they did not have “Spanish” names, nor
did they speak “Spanish.” The matriarch of one prominent Sephardi family of Istanbul, whose granddaughter had fallen in love with an Ashkenazi merchant, objected to the union because, to her understanding, someone who did not speak Spanish could not be a Jew (Estrugo 65). In the course of his fieldwork among Indianapolis Sephardim, Glazier once observed a non-Jewish Spanish-speaker chatting with older Ladino-speaking congregants in the local Sephardi synagogue. One worshiper asked the visitor how she managed to speak such good Spanish, despite not being Jewish (Glazier, “American Sephardim” 315). Acculturated European and American Ashkenazim who traveled to lands with majority Sephardi/Mizrahi populations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often taken for European-origin Christians, largely based on their dress. US-born Semitic scholar Cyrus Adler, who visited Damascus in 1891, noted that one “old [Jewish] man wasn’t satisfied that I was a Jew simply from being able to speak Hebrew, so he made me recite the Shema” (Robinson 46). Nahum Slouschz (1872–1969), an Odessa-born writer and Hebrew literature specialist who was traveling in Libya, found that both the governor of Tripoli and a Turkish administrative officer assumed he was a European Christian accompanied by a Jewish dragoman. Hayyim Habshush, Slouschz’s hired translator, probably presumed the same. “It was no avail for me to explain that I was not a Rumi (Christian),” Slouschz recalled, “nobody would believe me” (168). Slouschz was even more astonished by his reception from Jews on the island of Jerba: “I passed through the market unnoticed. I was evidently taken for some French Colonial, loafing through the town.” Only after he began to converse in Hebrew to an “old rabbi” did the local Jews realize his Jewish identity (253).

The impulse to equate one own’s Jewish culture with normativity and even exclusivity seems to be a factor of membership in an overwhelming majority, or of insulation from the wider world and its ethno-linguistic complexity (or both). But more broadly, these encounters speak to what Aschheim calls “the problem of Jewish identity in the modern world” (252) or perhaps better phrased, the consequences of westernization for modern Jewish diasporic relations. This crisis, as it effected Jews worldwide, brought into question the “nature and meaning of Jewish culture, commitment, and assimilation.” It also raised questions about the non-Jewish groups Jews were “mistaken” for. Where did one boundary begin and the other end?
HISTORY LESSONS: ASHKENAZI/SEPHARDI RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Ranked stratification and co-ethnic recognition failure may be the most salient features of Ashkenazi/Sephardi conflicts in modern times. Yet, as this brief comparative survey suggests, these tensions are structural in nature, rather than culturally specific to any Jewish ethnic group. Social class, longevity in the land, ethnic superiority myths, fear that newcomers would cause status demotion, and the Westernizing demands of broader society seem to be the main factors that interfered with intramarriage, joint worship and cooperation, and support for unimpeded immigration. Cultural insulation and hegemony, on the other hand, determined the denial of shared ethno-religious belonging. Yet, ranked stratification and co-ethnic recognition failure were two sides of the same diasporic coin, an international currency that memorialized what happened “when diasporas met” in a Westernizing age.

Some would argue that intra-Jewish friction has been transient and minor when compared to ethno-religious solidarity, and that the frequency or severity of “prejudice” or “discrimination” in the Jewish community is exaggerated. This skepticism compels us to think about the nature of historical sources, what causes such sources to come into being, and what ensures their preservation. It is not an accident that nearly every documented case of co-ethnic recognition failure is told from the perspective of the person denied shared ethnicity, or that most complaints about “Ashkenazi racism” come from Eastern Sephardim, Mizrahim, or “Jews of Color,” for it is they who bore the consequences. Such an experience was memorable and meaningful for them because it imperiled employment opportunities, romantic or marital liaisons, participation in the Jewish community, and the psychological wellbeing that social inclusion can bring. The denier of shared identity, on the other hand, would have found the experience of little importance, and thus had few incentives to recall or document it. Good historiographical practice demands that we consider the experiences and memories of non-normative groups, even if the narratives of the mainstream do not echo them.

Another important incentive for downplaying intra-Jewish hostilities may be that they are embarrassing to lay members of the communities and to scholars of the American Jewish experience whose academic and Jewish identities overlap. Intra-ethnic conflicts—whether past or current—contradict the dominant themes of American Jewish history, and subvert a “Jewish ascent narrative” that begins with flight from persecution, continues on to immigration and hardship, and resolves in a unified, albeit acculturated, American
Jewish community. This imagined progression has been popularized in the best known US Jewish novels, memoirs, and films (if not in much of American Jewish historiography), and represents the mainstream community’s preferred mode of self-representation to the outside world (Shapiro). But ignoring or deemphasizing internal conflict also means dismissing the power differentials between groups that erase or edit out marginal views from the historical transcript. It also means neglecting the multi-lingual immigrant documents (such as the Ladino press or interviews recorded in Spanish, Arabic, or Farsi) that centrally position immigrant hardships and exclusion from the broader Jewish community. Here again, the historical discipline demands that we consider neglected sources and how these may reshape our narrative of the American Jewish past.

The argument that intra-Jewish tensions were insignificant tacitly implies that a unified Jewish community has already been created via an American-style “mizug galuyyot,” a Jewish melting pot of diasporic groups into one cohesive people (Rejwan 22). Advocates of this ethical imperative seldom if ever acknowledge that the process of Jewish diasporic encounter and redefinition has always been closely informed by power differentials, with numerically dominant or hegemonic Jews shaping much of the discourse, arbitrating Jewish normativity, and dictating the cultural model. The risk for smaller or disempowered Jewish groups is always that Jewish unity will be achieved through the assimilation—in effect, disappearance—of their subcultures, rather than through the amalgamation or incorporation that “mizug galuyot” deceptively implies. No conversation about ahavat Israel within the framework of Jewish communal unity should ever take place without the awareness of the power dynamics we have examined in historical context. Similarly, no narrative of American Jewish history should ignore the process that dictates how we should remember the Jewish past, and what we should forget or ignore as “unimportant” or “unrepresentative.”

The increasing ancestral diversity of the American Jewish community in recent years ensures us that these uncomfortable issues are not confined to the past (Tobin, Tobin, and Rubin; Selengut). It would be foolhardy to argue that Jews were and are somehow unaffected by received attitudes, or by the fears and racial ideas of their broader non-Jewish environments. No degree of Jewish religious or ideological conviction can ever overpower these influences. If Jews today were to view their intra-group relations less in religious terms, and more in historical terms, a new conversation could begin.
Notes

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1. On some of these issues see Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shavuot 39a; Troen and Pinkus.

2. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi (1932–2009) related this maxim in a graduate seminar on Jews in the Ottoman Empire, which I attended at Columbia University in the early 1990s. The Hebrew phrase may be roughly translated in this context as “love for one’s fellow Jews.”

3. This view is best summarized by Marcus 1000-06.


5. For the emergence of this trend during World War I see “Sefardies” 496.

6. See also American Sephardi Federation.

7. The exact phrase, which actually alludes more to national origin than an east-west ethnic divide, is: “We are Israelites of the nineteenth century and a free country, and they gnaw the dead bones of past centuries . . . we let them be Jews and we are the American Israelites.”

8. Thomas cites “Rene Darmstadter, The Jewish Community” (manuscript), which I have not been able to locate.

9. Clara’s letter appears in Ladino translation only.

10. The short-lived newspaper Gadol says he launched before La America in reaction to co-ethnic recognition failure was probably La Agüila, the country’s first Ladino newspaper.

11. For another example of La America used as proof of Jewishness see Gadol, “La Nación.”

12. For Yemeni Jews as a physiologically varied group often mistaken for gentile Hispanic and black in the United States, see Arami 104.

13. The idea that Jews embody indelible, physical differences, however, is much older. See Gilman.

14. For parallel examples in the State of Israel see Dabnay-Miraglia, An Analysis of Ethnic Identity; “Acculturation and Assimilation”; “On the Outside Looking In”; Gross 1; and Hakak 117–18. For an example of the term applied to an Eastern Sephardic Jew see Varon 52.
Works Cited


Shapiro, Edward S. *We Are Many: Reflections on American Jewish History and Identity.* Syracuse: Syracuse Univ., 2005.


