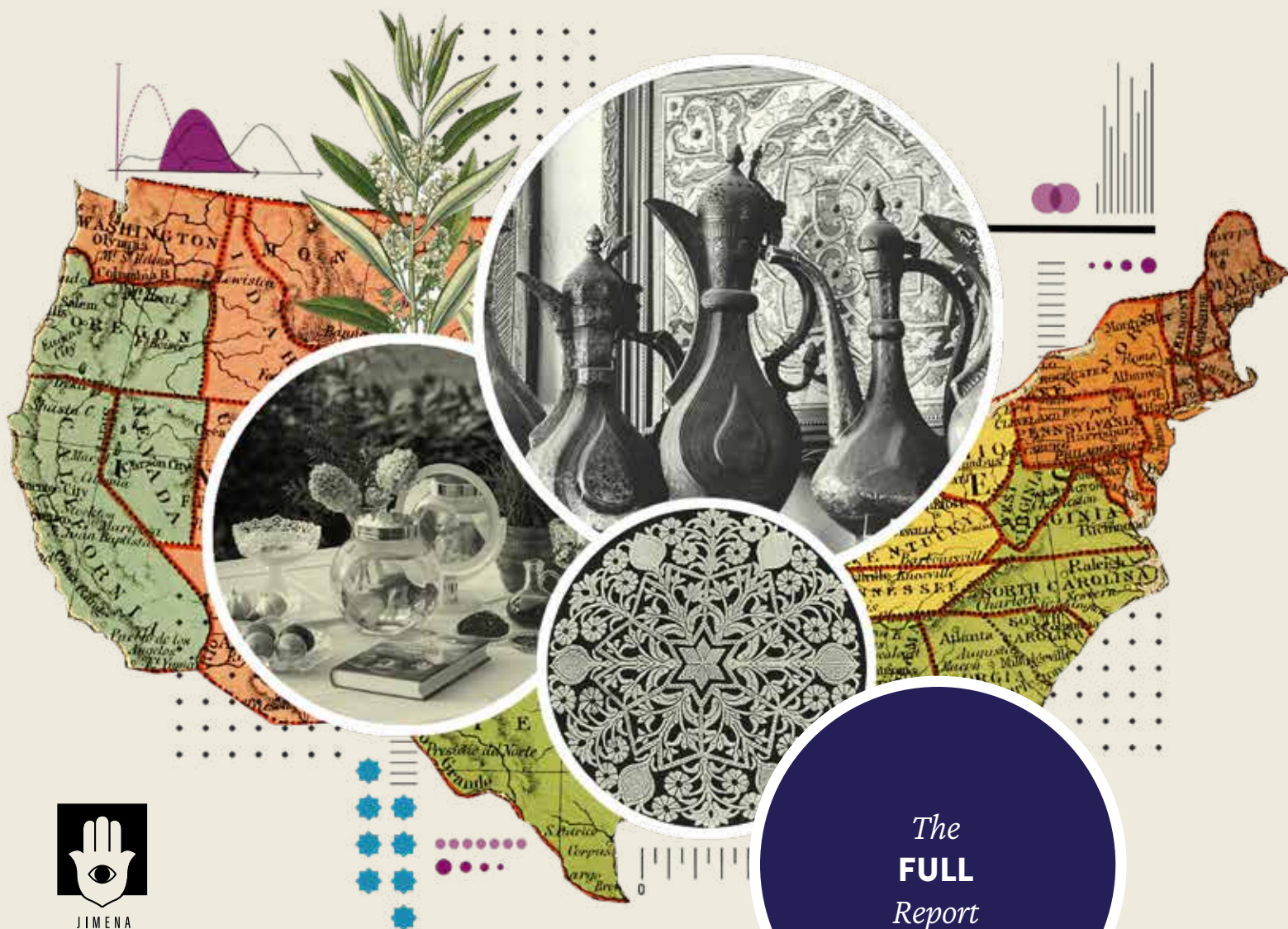


Sephardic & Mizrahi Jews in the United States:

IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES, AND COMMUNITIES



The
FULL
Report



JIMENA

Commissioned by
**JIMENA: JEWS INDIGENOUS
TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND
NORTH AFRICA**

DR. MIJAL BITTON
Principal Investigator and
Research Director



NYU

ROBERT F. WAGNER GRADUATE
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE



NYU

BRONFMAN

AUGUST 2025

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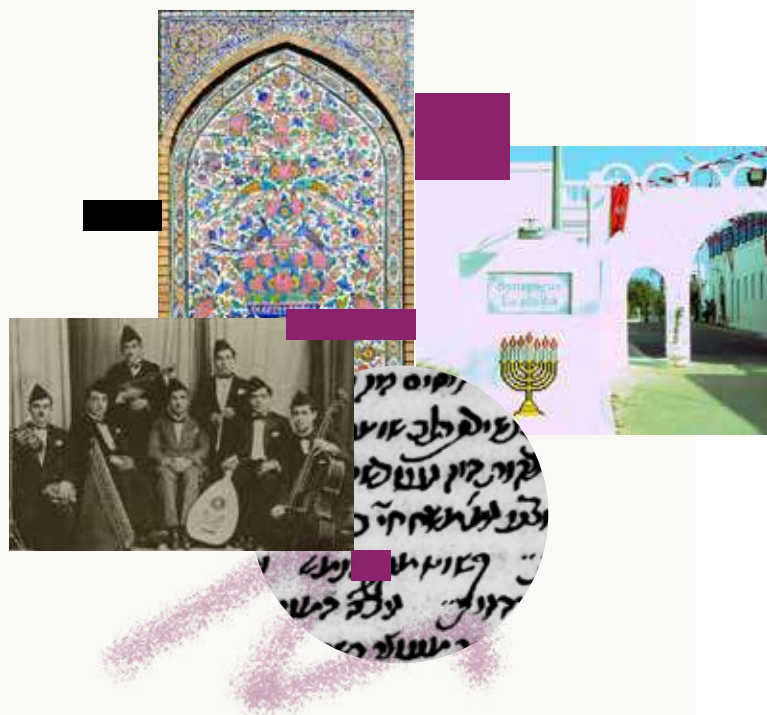


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About This Study

THIS REPORT IS ONE OF SEVERAL produced from a multi-year research project focused on understanding the identities, experiences, and communal life of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States. The study was conducted by an academic research team based at New York University, under the direction of Dr. Mijal Bitton, and was commissioned by JIMENA: Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa. It was made possible with the generous support of a range of philanthropic and institutional partners committed to advancing Sephardic and Mizrahi inclusion in Jewish communal life.

The project was carried out by a strong team of interdisciplinary researchers and benefitted from the guidance of an international academic advisory committee. In addition to academic input, we actively engaged practitioners and community leaders—both as interview participants and as advisors—to ensure the research reflected lived realities and communal perspectives.

The study aims to support a more inclusive Jewish communal landscape—one that reflects the richness, diversity, and complexity of Sephardic life. It is designed as a comprehensive resource: offering new data, field-based insights, historical context, and practical guidance to help scholars, educators, and communal professionals better understand and engage Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the American context.

This work brings together two complementary forms of research:

- **Secondary analysis** of existing literature reviews, historical material, and quantitative data—including national and local Jewish population surveys—organized through our guiding questions and reinterpreted through a Sephardic and Mizrahi lens.

- **Original fieldwork**, including interviews, site visits, and ethnographic observations across four key Sephardic communities shaped by post-1965 immigration.

Although the terms Sephardic and Mizrahi have distinct origins and meanings, this study reflects how they are used—and contested—by participants. In line with community usage, we primarily use “Sephardic” as a broad social identity while noting when “Mizrahi” is relevant. Across the study, we prioritized self-identification and recognized the limitations of existing categories—religious, racial, and ethnic—in capturing these communities’ realities.

The study was conducted during a time of shifting communal and political context for Jews in America—including the brutal October 7th attacks by Hamas in Israel, the subsequent rise in antisemitism across the US, and intensifying public debate around race, identity, and inclusion in American Jewish life. These broader dynamics shaped both the narratives we heard and the urgency of this work.

This project is offered as a first step, not a final word. It is not meant to be comprehensive or exhaustive, and we hope it serves as a foundation for future research. For further directions, see the “Recommendations” section of this report.

We invite you to explore the full report or delve into any of its focused sub-sections. Below is the full table of contents.

List of Reports:



THE
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REPORT



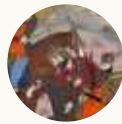
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THE
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REPORT



THE
Full Report

LETTER FROM

Sarah Levin

Executive Director, JIMENA

On behalf of JIMENA: Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, I am honored to present this landmark study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish Americans. This report represents a vital step forward in understanding the unique stories, challenges, and contributions of our diverse communities within the broader fabric of American Jewry.

Historically underrepresented—or worse, misrepresented—in Jewish communal studies and mainstream programs, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish Americans embody a rich tapestry of traditions, languages, and lived experiences that continue to shape Jewish identity. Our Middle Eastern, North African, and Mediterranean Jewish heritage, reflected in this report, is a testament to the resilience, family-oriented values, communal commitments, and unwavering pride passed down through generations of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. This heritage can and should become an integral component of every facet of Jewish life in America. Yet, our communities also face distinct challenges, from preserving and sharing foundational cultural elements to addressing the intergenerational impacts of displacement and migration.

Through rigorous data collection and analysis, this study seeks to illuminate the demographic, cultural, and social realities of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish Americans today. While the findings are not exhaustive, they provide a clearer picture of who we are and offer actionable insights to better address the needs and aspirations of our communities. Whether in the realms of education, mental health, religious life, or advocacy, this data empowers organizations, policy-makers, and Jewish leaders to craft more inclusive and impactful programs.

“

Our Middle Eastern, North African, and Mediterranean Jewish heritage, reflected in this report, is a testament to the resilience, family-oriented values, communal commitments, and unwavering pride passed down through generations of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews.

This project would not have been possible without the generous support of Jim Joseph Foundation, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies, Paul E. Singer Foundation, and Maimonides Fund through the Jewish Community Response and Impact Fund (JCRIF), and by the Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation, UJA Federation of New York, and the Jewish Federation Los Angeles and the engagement of countless individuals and institutions who contributed their voices and expertise. To them, we owe our deepest gratitude.

As we explore the findings of this study, let us remember that data are not just numbers and words on a page—they are a reflection of real lives, real stories, and a shared commitment to a vibrant and inclusive Jewish future.

I invite you to examine this report with curiosity, intention, and an open mind. Together, we can build a stronger, more unified Jewish community that celebrates the fullness of its diversity.

Dr. Mijal Bitton

Principal Investigator and
Research Director

This study is deeply personal. Born in Buenos Aires to a father of Moroccan and Syrian heritage and a mother of Spanish Moroccan descent, I grew up immersed in Sephardic traditions. Through marriage, I became part of a Sephardic family with roots in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. Sephardic communities—their traditions, family life, and friendships—have shaped my life.

Yet my commitment to this research goes beyond my personal connections to Sephardic Jewish communities. It also stems from three defining moments in my academic career.

The first occurred during a seminar with a celebrated American Jewish professor of Jewish studies. He stood at the whiteboard, mapping the history of Jewish life and its major trends. As he spoke, I waited for the moment he would pivot to the stories I knew intimately—Jews from places like Syria, Salonika, or Morocco. Surely, I thought, he would address or even acknowledge the ways Sephardic Jews encountered modernity and shaped Jewish life across the world. But that moment never came.

By the end of the session, I was left not only stunned by the omission of these communities but also deeply troubled by the lack of awareness surrounding their exclusion. This wasn't just a gap in scholarship; it was a lack of self-awareness about the narrowness of the narrative.

The second moment came during a 2013 luncheon in Washington, D.C., celebrating Sephardic contributions to American society. The event brought together 200 Sephardic leaders, mostly from US-based Middle Eastern and North African Jewish communities, alongside US government officials. While the gathering highlighted Sephardic voices, I soon realized that most speakers addressed the audience as if they were

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While the gathering highlighted Sephardic voices, I soon realized that most speakers addressed the audience as if they were descendants of the 23 Sephardic Jews who arrived in colonial New Amsterdam in 1654.

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These early Jewish settlers, largely of Iberian descent, were part of the broader Western Sephardic tradition and had a different historical trajectory from the later waves of Sephardic and Mizrahi immigration to America. Emma Lazarus was repeatedly invoked as the exemplar of Sephardic Jewry. Some mentioned Israeli Mizrahim, including Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, leading Sephardic halachic authority and former Chief Rabbi of Israel. Yet, overwhelmingly, no one spoke to an audience primarily composed of American Sephardic Jews from Morocco, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Greece, Turkey, and other countries who had arrived in the United States over the past 150 years.

The third moment came in 2020 amid a broader American reckoning around race and ethnicity, when I found myself inundated with requests from scholars, rabbis, journalists, and educators eager to learn more about Sephardic Jews. I deeply valued their good intentions and genuine desire for inclusion. Yet even as I wanted to contribute to this growing effort, I realized that the growing scholarly work on Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews produced in academic institutions was not organized or accessible to community audiences outside the academy.

These moments revealed three truths:

- Sephardic Jews are often absent from the dominant narratives of Jewish life, and their absence is often itself overlooked.
- Even well-meaning efforts to include Sephardic Jews frequently rely on historical archetypes, popular imagination, and assumptions, rather than engaging with living, evolving communities.
- There is both interest and need for organized and accessible facts-based scholarship on Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States.

This project addresses each of these truths, hopefully with success. It aims to translate academic scholarship on Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States into an accessible narrative for communal audiences. It examines existing data to provide estimates of the size of the Sephardic and Mizrahi population in the US and conducts new primary research on the lived experiences of four contemporary Sephardic Jewish communities in the United States. Additionally, it sets out a series of practical recommendations for educators and scholars when they teach about and conduct research on Sephardic Jews.

Above all, this project seeks to enrich and advance our collective American Jewish experience through the inclusion of the stories of Sephardic Jews and their communities—looking back at the past, engaging with the present, and moving forward to the future.

Over the past decade, through my doctoral research, independent study, and the development of this report, I have had the privilege of studying Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews across the United States. My efforts to lead and produce this report are my tribute to the hundreds of Sephardic Jews who welcomed me into their lives, shared their stories, and entrusted me—and the broader research team—with the responsibility of conveying them.

Acknowledgements

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Over one hundred people in communities in Queens and Brooklyn, NY; Los Angeles, CA; and South Florida participated as interviewees in this project. They opened their homes to us, told us about their lives, and shared their thoughts, insights, and perspectives. We thank them and hope they feel represented in the pages of this report.

RESEARCH TEAM

Dr. Mijal Bitton served as the Principal Investigator and Research Director of the study. She led a six-member research team that conducted interviews, observed community events, analyzed data, wrote community portraits, and provided additional materials for the report.

Dr. Bitton conducted this study as a Visiting Researcher at NYU's Wagner School of Public Policy and as research staff at NYU's Bronfman Center.

The research team includes:

Dr. Angeles Cohen, Ramón y Cajal Researcher, Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)

Dr. Max Daniel, Public Historian and Jewish Heritage Collection Coordinator, College of Charleston

Dr. Daniella Farah, Research Scholar in Iranian Jewish History

Dr. Ilana Horwitz, Assistant Professor of Jewish Studies and Sociology, Tulane University

Dr. Laura Limonic, Associate Professor of Sociology, SUNY Old Westbury

Dr. Elana Riback Rand, Collaborative for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE) Applied Research Fellow, The George Washington University

Lerone Edalati assisted with conducting and transcribing interviews for this study. Three research assistants, students at Tulane University, helped code interviews: **Noa Glashow, Avi Gorodetski, and Aaliya Enteen Weheliye.**

INSTITUTIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PARTNERS

This project was commissioned by JIMENA and was supported by a partnership between the NYU Wagner School for Public Policy (where Dr. Bitton is a Visiting Researcher) and the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life.

At New York University, the project was made possible by many people, especially Dr. Sherry Glied, Professor of Public Service at Wagner Graduate School of Public Service; Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, Executive Director of the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life and Adjunct Associate Professor of Public Service at the Wagner Graduate School of Public Service; and Jon ZefTel, Director of Business Operations at the Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life.

Researchers from Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies analyzed existing survey data on Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews from national and local Jewish community studies. Janet Krasner Aronson, PhD, Associate Director, and Matthew Brookner, PhD, Associate Research Scientist, authored a white paper estimating population size and patterns, which was incorporated into this report. They also contributed to the report's recommendations for researchers.

Rosov Consulting supported the development of the community portraits based on the researchers' write-ups, partnered with Dr. Bitton in writing and editing the report, and convened a practitioner roundtable to help inform the initial recommendations for both practitioners and researchers.

ACADEMIC ADVISORY COMMITTEE

A 14-member academic advisory committee strengthened the work of the research team by providing oversight, guidance, and support, and by critically reviewing and providing feedback on the written report. This report is better because of their efforts. The academic advisory committee included:

Dr. Ruth Behar, James W. Fernandez Distinguished University Professor of Anthropology, University of Michigan

Dr. Sarah Bunin Benor, Professor of Contemporary Jewish Studies and Director of the Jewish Language Project, Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion

Dr. Adriana Brodsky, Professor of History at St. Mary's College of Maryland

Dr. Alana Cooper, Abba Hillel Silver Chair of Jewish Studies, Assistant Professor at Case Western Reserve University

Dr. Galeet Dardashti, Assistant Professor of Jewish Music and Musician-in-Residence, Jewish Theological Seminary

Dr. Evelyn María Dean-Olmsted, Rosov Consulting

Dr. Yuval Evri, Marash and Ocuin Chair in Ottoman, Mizrahi and Sephardic Jewish Studies at Brandeis University

Dr. Nissim Leon, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bar Ilan University

Dr. Arielle Levites, Managing Director of the Collaborative for Applied Studies in Jewish Education (CASJE), George Washington University

Dr. Nadia Malinovich, Associate Professor of American Studies, Université de Picardie-Jules Vernes

Dr. Aviad Moreno, Lecturer at the Ben-Gurion Research Institute, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Dr. Ronnie Perelis, Associate Professor and Chief Rabbi Dr. Isaac Abraham and Jelena (Rachel) Alcalay Chair in Sephardic Studies, Bernard Revel Graduate School, Yeshiva University

Dr. Bryan Roby, Associate Professor of Judaic Studies, Frankel Institute, University of Michigan

Dr. Saba Soomekh, Director of Training and Education, American Jewish Committee



PRACTITIONER ADVISORS

We are deeply grateful to the practitioners who contributed to this effort, some of whom we acknowledge by name below. Due to institutional concerns, not all contributors were able to be named, but we recognize and appreciate their valuable input. These practitioners played a key role in data collection and reviewing the body of the report. Their insights informed the researchers in developing applied recommendations for practitioners.

Ty Alhadeff, Director of Education, JIMENA

Brigitte Dayan, Community Leader, NYC

Adam Eilath, Head of School, Wornick Jewish Day School

Rina Kattan Cohen, Manager of Community Organizing & External Relations, UJA Federation

Manashe Khaimov, Founder and CEO, Sephardic American Mizrahi Initiative (SAMi)

Rabbi Meyer Laniado, Associate Rabbi, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun

Ethan Marcus, Managing Director, Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America

Moji Pourmoradi, Former Director of the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center and Jewish Educator

Sara Rosenfeld, Head of School, Barkai Yeshivah

Rabbi Joey Soffer, Rabbi, Congregation Beth Torah; Rosh Bet Midrash, Barkai Yeshivah High School

PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORTERS

Funding for this project was generously provided by the Jim Joseph Foundation, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies, Paul E. Singer Foundation, and Maimonides Fund through the Jewish Community Response and Impact Fund (JCRIF), and by the Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation, UJA Federation of New York, and the Jewish Federation Los Angeles. We thank them for their confidence that this project was worthy of support.

GRATITUDE AND RESPONSIBILITY

We are profoundly grateful to all those who participated in this study, shared their insights and experiences, supported our research process, or reviewed drafts along the way. While we have done our best to represent the diversity of perspectives expressed, any errors or omissions are entirely our own.

What This Study Seeks to Do

This report is a starting point for scholars, professionals, and educators eager to better include and understand Sephardic Jews in the US. It is intended to serve as a resource for building a more inclusive Jewish communal landscape—one that acknowledges, understands, celebrates, and learns from the richness of Sephardic life. More specifically, this study aims to:

- Propose new frameworks for understanding Sephardic and Mizrahi identities and experiences in the United States by reviewing, synthesizing, and building on the existing literature.
- Provide population estimates and demographic characteristics of US Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews through a reanalysis of extant national and local community survey data.
- Present four in-depth portraits of contemporary Sephardic communities shaped by post-1965 immigration—including the Syrian community in Brooklyn, NY, the Persian community in Los Angeles, the Bukharian community in Queens, NY, and the Latin Sephardic community in South Florida—based on interviews, site visits, and public space observations.

- Offer practical recommendations developed in facilitated collaboration with communal practitioners and researchers for professionals and educators seeking deeper engagement with Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews.

We recognize that this report is neither exhaustive nor definitive. The challenges of conducting research on a small population that is highly diverse internally led us to focus on four specific, geographically well-defined communities. This decision necessarily excluded other communities and individuals in the United States, including—but not limited to—Turkish, Greek, Moroccan, Iraqi, and Yemenite Sephardic communities; Israeli Mizrahi Jews; and Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews who are integrated into broader Ashkenazi or American Jewish communities.

We also do not address a growing trend of groups and individuals who identify as Bnei Anussim or crypto-Jews—those who identify as descendants of Jews who converted to Catholicism under duress and who are now re-exploring their connection to Judaism. In addition, we captured these four communities at a particular point in time, but communities are dynamic and changing, and we do not know what the future holds for them. We hope that our findings presented here inspire future research encompassing other Sephardic Jews and their communities.

WHAT THIS REPORT COVERS VS. WHAT IT LEAVES OUT

This Report Does:

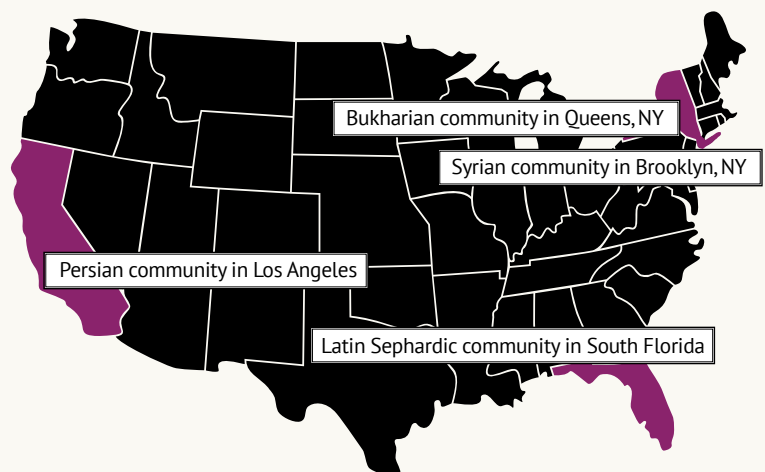
- ✔ Propose new frameworks
- ✔ Analyze 4 key communities
- ✔ Provide demographic estimates
- ✔ Offer recommendations for professionals

This Report Does Not:

- ✘ Focus on Sephardic or Mizrahi individuals living outside Sephardic communities
- ✘ Claim exhaustive representation of all Sephardic Jews
- ✘ Cover crypto-Jews or Bnei Anussim
- ✘ Predict future dynamics of communities



The study provides portraits of 4 contemporary Sephardic communities shaped by post-1965 immigration



Research Principles

ACADEMIC STUDY AND ACTIVIST / COMMUNAL NARRATIVES

The past four years have seen growing attention to underrepresented populations, a trend we applaud, and one that has been matched by a renewed activist spirit to fight for their inclusion at both national and local levels. We believe this interest must be accompanied by academic rigor and thoughtful inquiry. While this study has been informed by the needs and concerns of Sephardic Jews and community leaders, it has been conducted by an academic research team that has carefully distinguished descriptive and analytic findings from communal and activist interests.

PRIORITIZING SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND PERCEPTION

We aimed, as much as possible, to center the voices of our subjects and to prioritize self-identification over imposing categories from external sources. For instance, we have been careful when using the term Sephardic or Mizrahi in this study. This approach reflects our commitment to respecting how individuals identify with either or both categories. Similarly, when examining religious observance, we ask respondents to define their own terms (e.g., “traditional” or “Orthodox”). For questions of race and ethnicity, we prioritize self-identification rather than assuming individuals use terms like Arab Jews, JOC (Jews of color), or “white.”

“

We aimed, as much as possible, to center the voices of our subjects and to prioritize self-identification over imposing categories from external sources.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL HUMILITY

Efforts to shed light on underrepresented populations must remain open to critique, debate, and revision. In this study, we’ve aimed not only to share our conclusions, but also to be transparent about how we reached them. We welcome dialogue, recognize that we may have made mistakes, and hope these findings inspire others to continue expanding the field and building on what we’ve begun.



Major Frameworks

We relied on four important frameworks in writing this report. These frameworks include:

- **Diversity Within Diversity:** Sephardic Jews represent diversity in relation to the Ashkenazi Jewish majority in the US while also exhibiting significant internal diversity across geographic, cultural, and religious lines.
- **Sephardic Jews as a Migration Story:** The experience of Sephardic Jews in the US has been profoundly shaped by countries of origin, migration timing, push-and-pull migration factors, and settlement patterns.
- **Rethinking “East” and Modernity:** The paths of Sephardic Jews (particularly those from Muslim-majority societies) in relation to modernity, postmodernity, and American life should be analyzed as distinct historical and social developments rather than portraying them as lagging behind Western progress.
- **The Need for Appropriate Scholarly Categories:** Scholarly categories designed to study the Ashkenazi majority in the US need to be revised and refashioned for studying Sephardic Jews.

DIVERSITY WITHIN DIVERSITY

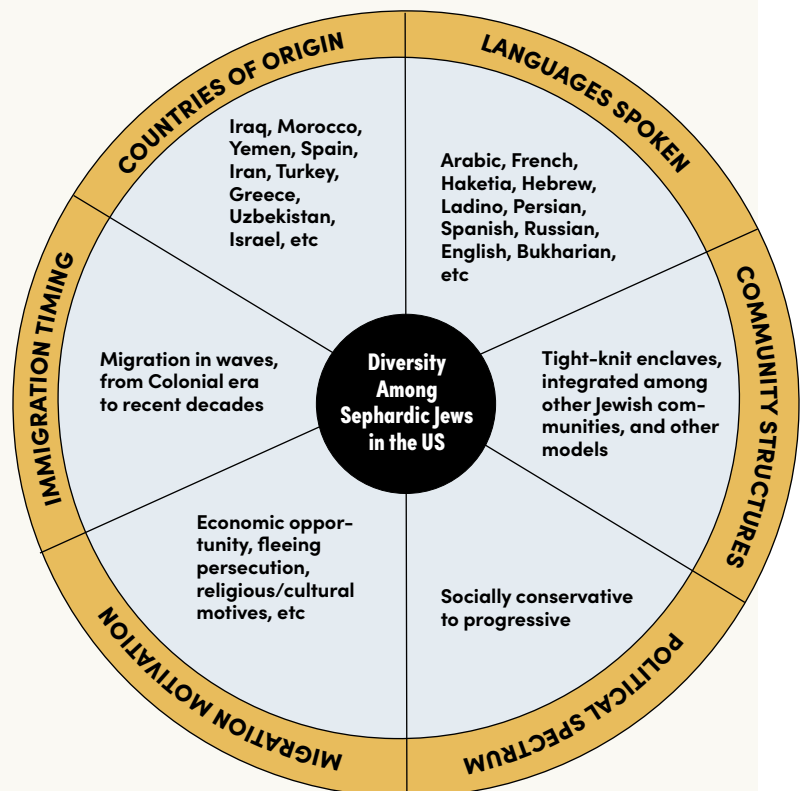
Nobel Laureate Elias Canetti once observed: “Jews are different from other people, but, in reality, they are most different from each other” (*Crowds and Power*, p. 178). No population is monolithic, and Sephardic Jews in the US are no exception. Here are some key dimensions of their diversity:

- **Countries of Origin:** Sephardic Jews trace their roots to countries as varied as Iraq,

Morocco, Yemen, and Spain. Many families have histories spanning multiple migrations across time.

- **Minority Experiences in Countries of Origin:** Some Sephardic Jewish communities developed in Christian-majority contexts, some in Muslim-majority contexts, and some in both. These historical circumstances and trajectories have shaped Jewish practice, identity, and social structures.

MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY IN SEPHARDIC JEWS



NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- Understanding Sephardic Jews requires attention to both culture of origin and immigration experience—a “dual lens”
- Many Sephardic Jews come from Muslim-majority countries
- Religious survey categories like Orthodox, Conservative, Reform are rooted in Ashkenazi European experience and often fail to describe Sephardic Jews

- **Time of Immigration:** Sephardic Jews have arrived in America across centuries, from the colonial period to the 21st century.
- **Reason for Immigration:** Push-and-pull factors contributed to Sephardic immigration. Some immigrants came seeking economic opportunities, while others fled persecution in their home countries. Many came for both of these reasons or for additional motives.
- **Languages:** Sephardic Jews in the United States speak a wide range of languages from their countries of origin, including Arabic, French, Haketia (a Judeo-Spanish language from Northern Morocco with Arabic influences), Hebrew, Ladino (a Judeo-Spanish language with influences from Hebrew, Turkish, and Greek), Persian, Spanish, and Russian. Some Sephardic Jews in the United States are

late-generation descendants of immigrants and consequently only speak English.

- **Communal Structures:** Some Sephardic Jews live in tight-knit enclaves with their own communal institutions, while others have integrated into Ashkenazi spaces or broader American society.
- **Moral and Political Diversity:** Community members range from socially and politically conservative to socially and politically progressive.
- **Internal Community Distinctions:** Each community contains its own layers of diversity.

SEPHARDIC JEWS AS A MIGRATION STORY

Contemporary Sephardic Jews in the US cannot be understood without considering how their population has been shaped and revitalized by immigration, especially post-1965 immigration. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which removed restrictive and discriminatory quotas in place since 1924, marked a turning point in American immigration policy. This shift places the Sephardic communities profiled in this study alongside other minority groups, such as Vietnamese and Asian Indian immigrants, whose post-1965 arrival profoundly shaped their experiences in the US.

The effects of immigration depend on many factors, including country of origin and time since arrival. A recent immigrant with a foreign accent and no professional accreditation faces vastly different challenges than their grandchild who was born and raised in the United States. This also has implications for Jewish identification and observance: first-generation Sephardic Jews often maintain tighter communal structures and more socially conservative norms compared to those whose families have resided in the US for multiple generations.

This has important implications for practitioners. For example, when teachers seek to better integrate their Persian Jewish students in an Ashkenazi-majority classroom, they should consider not only the cultural dynamics of Jewish life from Iran but also the experience of being descendants of recent immigrants.

Understanding this dual context—country of origin and immigrant status—is essential for effectively engaging with Sephardic and Mizrahi communities in America today.

RETHINKING “EAST” AND MODERNITY

There is a pervasive tendency to view Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews—especially those whose families came from Muslim-majority countries, including across the Middle East and North Africa—as “backwards.” Some of our interview subjects have encountered people who describe Sephardic Jews like them as “exotic” or “antiquated,” or who dismiss their traditions as repressive.

As historian Daniel Schroeter writes:

European Jews described Middle Eastern and North African Jewish communities as ‘traditional,’ essentially no different from Jews in pre-emancipation Europe. But they believed that emancipation would bring the oppressed and backward communities of the Arab world into the modern age: East would become West... most scholars have assumed the inevitability of modernization of Jewish communities on a Western model...

(A Different Road to Modernity, p. 156–59)

“

Sephardic Jews are not incomplete versions of Ashkenazi American modernity, nor are they simply behind on some presumed timeline of progress; they embody distinct pathways that merit both study and consideration.

This reflects a Western-centric moral framework that presumes the liberal West to be the ultimate arbiter of progress. It also reflects a lack of understanding about different processes of modernization and even westernization that occurred in many different locales around the world, including countries in the Middle East and North Africa where many of our interviewees come from.

We do not share the assumptions that undergird this perspective. Sephardic Jews are not incomplete versions of Ashkenazi American modernity, nor are they simply behind on some presumed timeline of progress; they embody distinct pathways that merit both study and consideration. This study does not aim to moralize but rather to describe the worlds of meaning inhabited by Sephardic Jews on their own terms—including the ways they have forged new approaches to confronting modernity, post-modernity, and America, and their many challenges and opportunities.

THE NEED FOR APPROPRIATE SCHOLARLY CATEGORIES

A related challenge this report addresses is that Sephardic Jews have often been studied through scholarly categories designed for the Ashkenazi majority. Take denominational Jewish religious labels like Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. These categories, used widely in surveys to study US Jews, are rooted in European Jewish Ashkenazi experiences and often fail to capture Sephardic historical trajectories and contemporary realities. This disconnect exemplifies a broader issue: the categories researchers use to study American Jews frequently obscure the experiences of Sephardic communities.

In confronting this challenge, we join many scholars across disciplines who have explored the complexities of studying populations that do not fit neatly into dominant academic categories. Scholarship by academics studying Mizrahi Jews in Israel has been especially relevant to this report, as they have grappled with similar questions.

Although there is no simple solution to this issue, inclusion requires a clear understanding of what dominant categories reveal, what they hide, and what demands careful translation to new conceptual frameworks.

Works Consulted

This project was informed by and benefitted from an extensive collection of scholarly literature on Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Because the report is designed for a public audience, we did not use a traditional academic citation system within the body of the report. A selected list of the works we consulted in developing this study is included as an appendix to the report, divided into subject areas.

Evolving Context and Impact on Findings

As this study was conducted, significant external events shaped both the research process and the data collected. Two key developments stand out.

First, the horrific October 7th attacks by Hamas in southern Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza and rise in antisemitism across the United States had a profound impact—not only on the logistics of this project, causing a clear pause in research, but also on the narratives and priorities expressed by participants. Data collected

before and after this date reflect a noticeable shift in focus, with respondents addressing different concerns in light of unfolding events.

Second, initiatives aimed at the inclusion and advancement of racial and ethnic minorities in the US, such as DEI efforts, have increasingly become a polarizing political issue, particularly in the lead-up to the 2024 US election. As we conducted interviews with participants before the election and asked them about race, ethnicity, diversity, and inclusion—topics deeply connected to the broader discourse on DEI—their responses reflected the ongoing debate and political salience of these issues. The evolving political landscape shaped how respondents understood and articulated their identities, influencing both their personal perspectives and communal narratives.

These contextual shifts framed the environment in which our research was conducted, and their effects merit careful consideration when interpreting our findings.



Summary of Findings Introduction



A Note on Terminology:

In our primary research and literature review, we found that “Sephardic” is the more widely used term in the US over the term “Mizrahi” and remains the more common form of self-identification. Accordingly, the body of this report primarily uses “Sephardic,” though not exclusively. At times we refer to Sephardic and Mizrahi as an aggregate category due to the data sources we use.

THIS STUDY AIMS TO:



Propose new frameworks for understanding Sephardic and Mizrahi identities and experiences in the United States by reviewing, synthesizing, and building on the existing literature.



Provide population estimates and demographic characteristics of US Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews through a reanalysis of existing national and local community survey data.



Present four in-depth portraits of contemporary Sephardic communities shaped by post-1965 immigration—specifically, the Syrian community in Brooklyn, NY, the Persian community in Los Angeles, the Bukharian community in Queens, NY, and the Latin Sephardic community of South Florida—based on interviews, site visits, and public space observations.



Offer practical recommendations developed in facilitated collaboration with communal practitioners and researchers for professionals and educators seeking deeper engagement with Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews.

In conducting our research, we were guided by three research principles:

1. Distinguishing between scholarly findings produced by the study’s researchers and the narratives employed by community insiders and shared with us.
2. Prioritizing the way our research participants identify themselves rather than imposing categories on them.
3. Conducting our work honestly and with humility, being open to critique, and welcoming dialogue.

In addition, we both relied on and in turn emphasized four important empirical frameworks in writing this report:

- **Diversity Within Diversity:** Sephardic Jews represent diversity in relation to the Ashkenazi Jewish majority in the United States while also exhibiting significant internal diversity across geographic, cultural, and religious lines.¹
- **Sephardic Jews as a Migration Story:** The experience of Sephardic Jews in the US has been profoundly shaped by countries of origin, migration timing, push-and-pull migration factors, and settlement patterns.
- **Rethinking “East” and Modernity:** The paths of Sephardic Jews (particularly those from Muslim-majority societies) in relation to modernity, post-modernity, and American life should be analyzed as distinct historical and social developments rather than portraying them as lagging behind Western progress.²
- **The Need for Appropriate Scholarly Categories:** Scholarly categories designed to study the Ashkenazi majority in the US need to be revised and refashioned for analyzing Sephardic Jews.

4 LENSES FOR UNDERSTANDING SEPHARDIC JEWS IN THE US

This study draws on four key frameworks to better capture the experiences of Sephardic Jews in the United States



1. DIVERSITY WITHIN DIVERSITY

Sephardic Jews both enrich the diversity of American Jewish life and contain rich internal variation shaped by geography, language, religious practice, and migration histories



2. SEPHARDIC JEWS AS A MIGRATION STORY

Their experiences in the US are deeply shaped by layered migration journeys, from the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond, each with distinct timelines, drivers, and settlement patterns



3. RETHINKING “EAST” AND MODERNITY

Rather than viewing Sephardic communities through a Western-centric lens, their paths to modernity and adaptation to American life should be seen as complex and distinct in their own right.



4. THE NEED FOR APPROPRIATE SCHOLARLY CATEGORIES

Scholarly frameworks built around Ashkenazi norms often fall short in capturing Sephardic realities, highlighting the need for new categories that reflect their specific histories and identities.

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States

MEANINGS, IDENTITIES, AND EXPERIENCES

Recent years have seen a growing interest in the Sephardic experience in the US, both in academic circles and Jewish communal organizations. This interest—catalyzed in part by the country’s broader reckoning with racial and ethnic diversity, marginalization, and underrepresentation in recent years—has brought to the surface important questions about the terms “Sephardic” and “Mizrahi.” Where did these terms originate, and what do they mean today? Who do they refer to, and what do they signify for those who claim these identities and heritages? What is the background and timing of Sephardic and Mizrahi immigration to the United States? And what is the relationship between Sephardic and Mizrahi as categories and the common categories of race and ethnicity in the United States?

The term Sephardic—originating in the biblical book of Obadiah—has come to refer to ancestry, religion, and/or identity. As ancestry, it references Jews of Iberian or Spanish descent, whose various migrations over

centuries took them to many regions including England, the Netherlands, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Americas.

As religious practice, *Sephardic* refers to one of two main traditions—alongside *Ashkenazi*—within a largely shared system of *Halakha* (Jewish law) and *minhag* (custom), each offering its own distinct yet complementary practices.

Sephardic religious practice often correlates with *masortiyut*, a religious traditionalism that combines reverence for religious laws, customs, legitimations, and authorities, especially in the communities’ public spaces, with flexibility in personal and family religious observance. Sephardic can also refer to a social identity, adopted by those populations influenced by the migration of Sephardic Jews and standing in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews. Over time in the United States, Sephardic came to signify a pan-ethnic identity shared by and across many non-Ashkenazi Jews who found

TIMELINE OF SEPHARDIC IMMIGRATION TO THE US



Colonial and Early National Period (1600s - 1800s)
Jews of **Iberian descent** establish small but cohesive Sephardic communities in cities like **Savannah, Georgia** and **Newport, Rhode Island**



Late 19th and Early 20th Century
Sephardic Jews from the **Ottoman Empire**, particularly **Ladino-speaking Jews from Greece and Turkey**, and **Syrian Jews**, begin immigrating to the US



1924
Restrictive Immigration Act of 1924 establishes national origins quotas favoring Northern and Western Europeans. The law **severely limits immigration** from the Middle East, North Africa, and Southern Europe—shaping US Sephardic migration patterns for decades



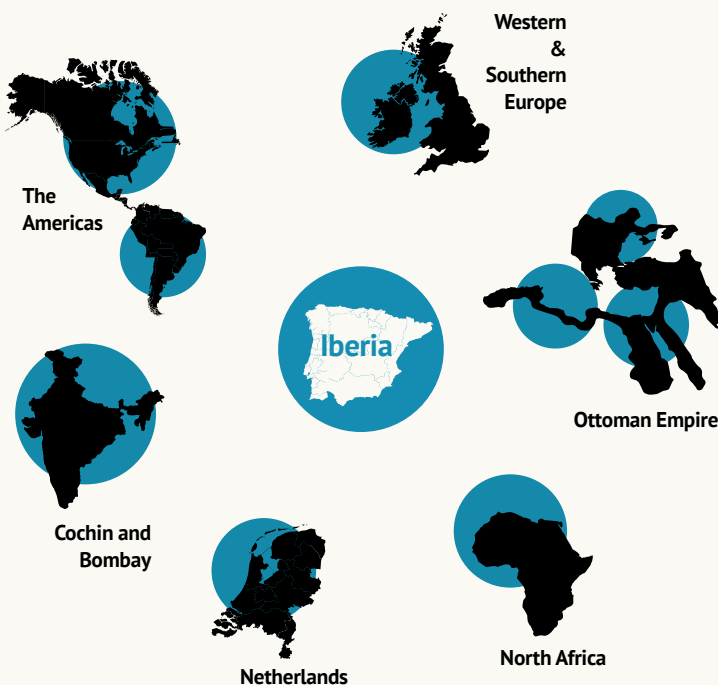
Post-1965
Immigration policy liberalization allows a **new wave of Sephardic immigration**, with distinct communities reshaping the Sephardic Jewish experience in the US

themselves a minority in relation to the Ashkenazi Jewish majority.

The Sephardic Jewish experience in the United States is chronologically long, geographically diverse, and thematically multifaceted. In the colonial and early national period, Western European Jews of Iberian descent established small but cohesive Sephardic communities from Savannah, Georgia to Newport, Rhode Island. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Sephardic Jews from the Ottoman Empire—in particular Ladino-speaking Jews from Greece and Turkey, and Syrian Jews—began immigrating to the United States. The restrictive Immigration Act of 1924 and the decimation of Balkan and Greek Sephardic communities during the Holocaust limited Sephardic immigration for much of the succeeding 40 years, but the liberalization of immigration policy in 1965 opened the door once again. Since then, distinct Sephardic communities have immigrated to the US and reshaped the story of Sephardic Jews in this country.

SEPHARDIC MIGRATION FROM IBERIA

Key destinations where Iberian Jews settled—across continents and through multi-step journeys



“

Over time in the United States, Sephardic came to signify a pan-ethnic identity shared by and across many non-Ashkenazi Jews who found themselves a minority in relation to the Ashkenazi Jewish majority.

Like the term Sephardic, Mizrahi can refer to ancestry, religion, and identity. However, unlike the term Sephardic, Mizrahi is a relatively new term. It emerged in Israel in the mid-to-late 20th century to refer to Jews from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Although initially promoted by Ashkenazim first as *edot Hamizrah* (communities of the “East”), the term was reclaimed over time and appropriated by Mizrahi Jews. Today, about half of all Israeli Jews have some Mizrahi ancestry. Mizrahim in Israel generally align with Sephardic Jewish law and customs, and many with its traditionalist orientation to religious practice. Mizrahi can refer to a social identity, particularly in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews. Mizrahim in Israel have faced systemic inequalities, including state-sponsored discrimination, cultural marginalization, and economic bias. Socio-economic gaps between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim in Israel have narrowed but remain evident.

In our interviews, *Sephardic* was by far the preferred term over *Mizrahi*, reflecting what we are confident is, at present, the norm among Jews of MENA background in the US, where the term *Mizrahi* is less commonly used given its development, history, and usage in Israel. The term Mizrahi appears to have entered Jewish discourse in the United States in the early 2000s, introduced by those seeking to connect Sephardic Jews in the US to Mizrahi identity and/or the Mizrahi struggle in Israel. As a form of personal and social identity, it has also been adopted by a small group of US Jews with Middle Eastern or North African roots who feel uncomfortable with the term Sephardic due to their lack of Spanish or

Iberian ancestry. For them, it serves as a way to distinguish themselves from both Sephardic and Ashkenazi counterparts. Meanwhile, others have combined Mizrahi with Sephardic, usually in the form Sephardic/Mizrahi, a hybrid identity that collectively stands in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews. The adoption of these identifiers varies across communities, age groups, and political affiliations.

SEPHARDIC JEWS AND US RACIAL AND ETHNIC CATEGORIES

The growing interest in Sephardic Jews has emerged alongside the broader national reckoning with racial and ethnic diversity, marginalization, and underrepresentation across America and inside American Jewish communities. Yet efforts to understand Sephardic experiences within US race and ethnic frameworks are insufficient and often misdirected. It is important not to assume that the experiences of Jews who identify as Sephardic or Mizrahi and Jews who identify with US racial and ethnic categories—such as black, Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern—are parallel. These cases can have structural similarities in the sense of exclusion from or unequal

representation in majority group spaces. Still, the minority status of Sephardic Jews within majority-Ashkenazi spaces is distinct from the minority status of Jews with minority racial and ethnic identities within majority-white Jewish spaces. Conflating them risks oversimplifying how identity, history, and contemporary perspectives may differ among and between these communities.

Sephardic Jews themselves have varied perspectives on US racial and ethnic categories. When asked, some Sephardic Jews identify as white, others as Asian, Black, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern, but many reject US racial and ethnic categories altogether because these classifications do not reflect their experiences in their countries of origin nor represent their self-understanding.

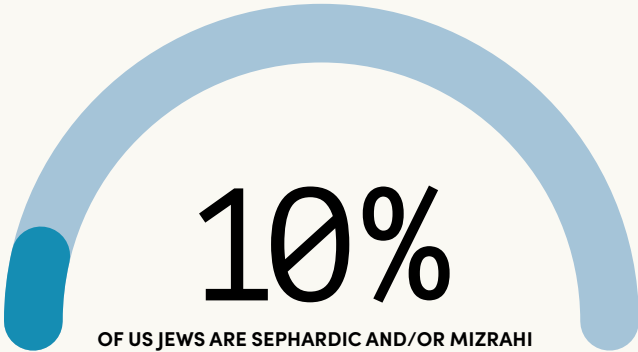
The overwhelming majority of our interviewees—Syrian, Bukharian, Hispanic, Persian, and other Jews from the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region—told us they do not identify with the category of Jews of color. However, a minority of Sephardic Jews do identify as Jews of color and/or have built alliances with organizations representing Jews of color, citing shared experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and underrepresentation within the broader Jewish community.



The Population Size and Characteristics of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States

Because the US government does not collect information on religious groups and does not count Jews among its official racial and ethnic groups, estimates of the size and characteristics of the Jewish population rely on non-governmental surveys. While surveys of the US Jewish population go back many decades, it is only in relatively recent years that surveys of Jewish populations have begun asking about Sephardic and Mizrahi heritage.

In an analysis conducted explicitly for this study, the Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS) at Brandeis University utilized the Pew Research Center's 2020 national survey of US Jews and eight local Jewish community studies—in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Greater MetroWest (NJ), Kansas City,



Long Beach (CA), Louisville, and Delaware—to generate estimates about the size of the adult Sephardic and Mizrahi populations in the US and provide selected socio-demographic and Jewish characteristics about them.

The varying estimates of the size of the population take into account the different ways survey questions asked about Sephardic and Mizrahi identity and the different response options they offered. Based on many factors discussed in our quantitative section, we estimate that 10% of US Jews are Sephardic and/or Mizrahi.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Compared to Ashkenazi Jews, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews report higher rates of communal participation, a stronger connection to Israel, and a higher share of respondents for whom being Jewish is “somewhat” or “very much” a part of their daily life,³ while showing lower intermarriage rates. Sephardic Jews and Mizrahi Jews are more likely than Ashkenazi Jews to be born and/or raised outside the United States, to be politically moderate or conservative, and to be economically vulnerable.⁴ Ashkenazi Jews, in turn, are more likely to have a graduate degree.

NOTEWORTHY FINDINGS

- ➔ In the US, "Sephardic" is more commonly used than "Mizrahi" among Jews of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) descent
- ➔ Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews trace their ancestry to a wide range of countries, including Spain, Morocco, Iran, Yemen, Turkey, and Iraq, etc

Community Portraits

Starting in 1965, changes to US immigration policy opened doors for immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. These immigration reforms played a significant role in shaping the Sephardic landscape in the United States. The four communities profiled in the report illustrate these dynamics, reinforcing the usage of the term Sephardic as a pan-ethnic identity in the US.

Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn, NY

Already established by previous waves of immigration, the Syrian community became a hub for Jews fleeing anti-Jewish persecution and instability, including Jews who fled or were expelled from Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, Jews escaping the civil war in Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s, and Jews who were finally allowed to leave Syria in the 1990s after enduring decades of anti-Jewish state persecution, including restrictions on emigration. These successive waves of immigration helped shape what is now known as the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn.

Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles

Prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the country had a large and established Jewish population, primarily concentrated in cities like Tehran, Isfahan, and Shiraz. The revolution, which ushered in an Islamist theocracy with strict religious laws and hostility toward the State of Israel, created what most Jews felt was a hostile and even dangerous environment. These conditions propelled the majority of the Persian Jewish community to flee or leave the country, seeking safety and stability in countries like the United States, Israel, and Europe. Many Persian Jews settled in Los Angeles, forming one of the largest Persian Jewish diasporas outside Iran.

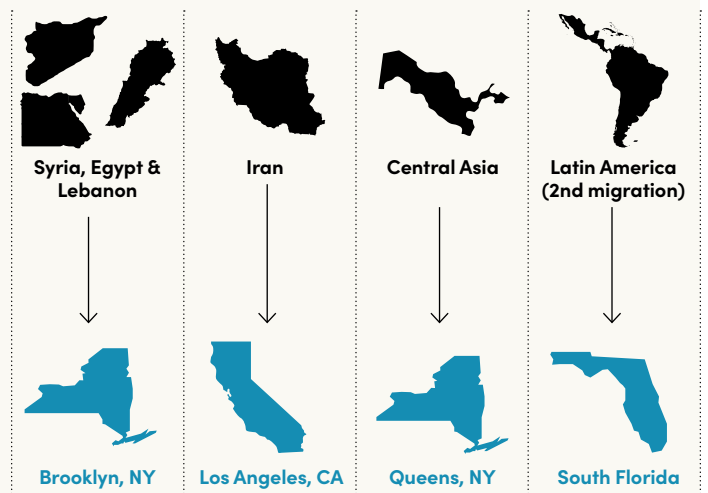
Bukharian Jewish community in Queens, NY

Bukharian Jews, whose roots stretch back hundreds of years to Central Asia, came under Russian control in the late 19th century, though their region did not face the same Soviet restrictions on Jewish practice as those in European and other more Russified areas of the Soviet Union. Immigration to the United States occurred in two waves: a small one in the 1970s and a larger one in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as economic instability and rising antisemitism following the Soviet Union's collapse prompted many Jews to seek new opportunities. Bukharian Jews dispersed globally, with significant populations settling in Israel and Queens, NY.

Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida

Beginning in the early 20th century, Jewish immigrants from the Mediterranean, Middle East, and North Africa settled in countries across Latin America, where they established small yet vibrant communities. Most sought better economic prospects and/or fled rising anti-Jewish sentiment in their home countries, particularly after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. In recent decades, political and economic instability across Latin America has driven many of these Jews—who combine Sephardic and Hispanic identities—to migrate to the United States, with a significant number settling in South Florida.

4 SEPHARDIC JOURNIES TO THE US



Community commonalities

These communities share a set of commonalities. Family as an institution is core to all of them. Deep and abiding family relationships, family responsibilities, and consistent family gatherings for Shabbat, holidays, and other celebrations all mark the central role of family in these Sephardic communities.

Sephardic religious practice in the four communities reflects a strong sense of traditionalism, combining respect for religious laws, customs, legitimations, and authorities with more flexible personal and family religious observance. For some, traditionalism stands apart from denominational labels—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist—that characterize much of Ashkenazi US Jewry. For others, traditionalism has become aligned with Ashkenazi-denominational labels. We saw a strong trend toward growing adoption of and alignment with Orthodoxy among those we interviewed.

The communities are engaged in a constant negotiation of change and continuity. In America, they tend

“

Traditionalism often transcends denominational lines.

to maintain strong ethnic connections, particularly through marriage within their own communities and the preservation of distinct cultural traditions. They also retain deep ties to their Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and North African heritage.

Most community members exhibit a notable resistance to language that frames race as their primary identity, categorizes them as Jews of color, or positions them as a minority group in need of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

Community members are generally socially and politically conservative. This conservatism applies to US domestic issues, their strongly-held connections to Israel and Zionism, and their vigorous sense of belonging to the Jewish people.

Community differences

The four communities also differ in key ways. The factors that brought them to the United States vary. Early Syrian Jews in Brooklyn migrated primarily in search of better economic opportunities, while later Syrian Jews (and Egyptian and Lebanese Jews who joined their community) and most Persian Jews in Los Angeles fled anti-Jewish regimes. Bukharians in Queens emigrated from Central Asia as the Soviet Union collapsed and the emerging Muslim-majority states created unpredictable living conditions for Jews. Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida who conducted a second migration (e.g., Morocco to Venezuela and then

UNIFYING THREADS

Sephardic & Mizrahi Community Commonalities



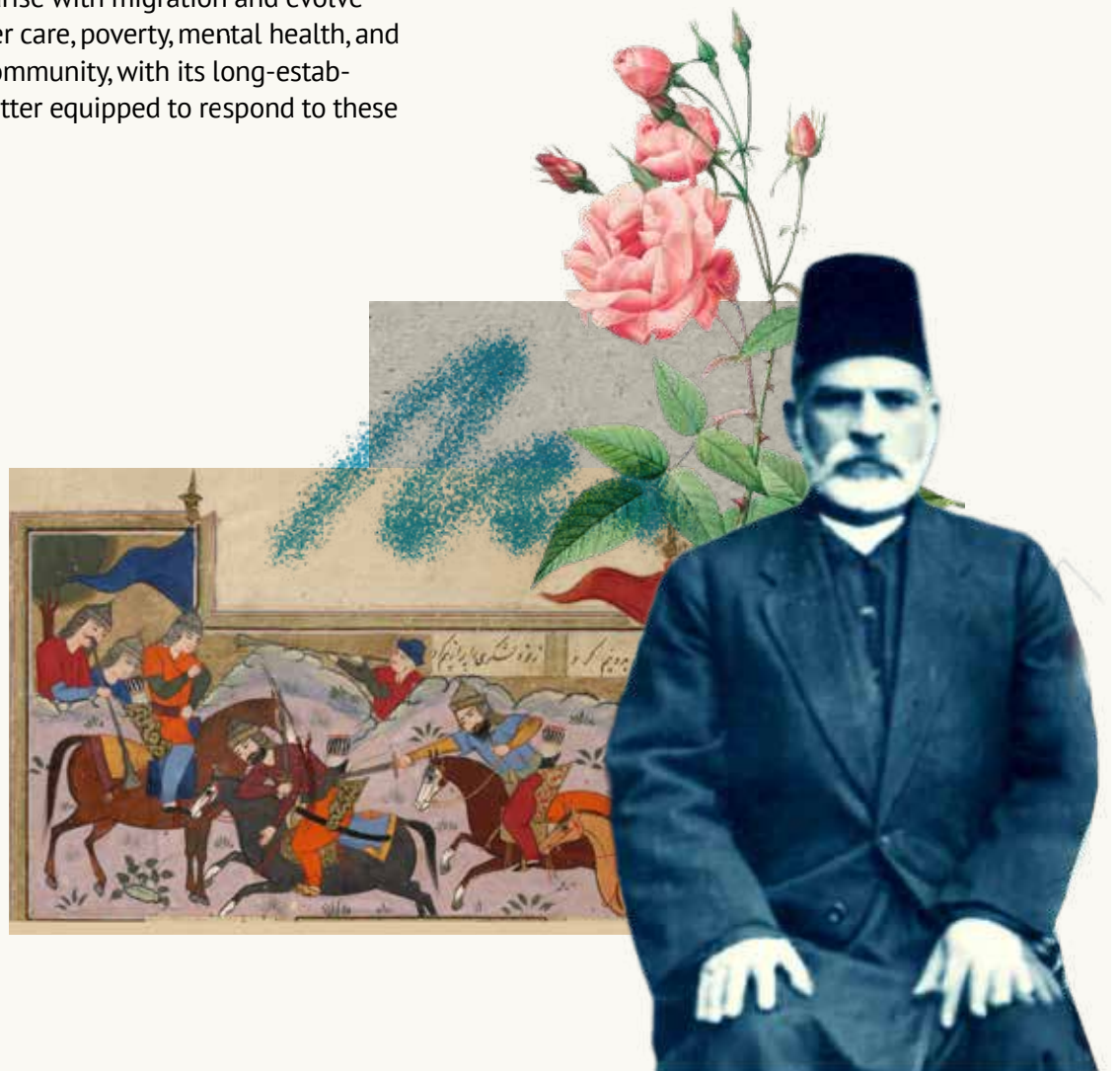
to Florida) left to escape broader social upheavals and severe economic disruptions where they were living.

Relationships with the majority-Ashkenazi population and institutions vary across communities. The Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn has built robust internal infrastructure, allowing it to remain largely independent. Persian Jews in Los Angeles combine strong family networks with significant reliance on Ashkenazi-led institutions. Bukharian Jews in Queens have developed their own synagogues while still primarily turning to Ashkenazi-led organizations for services like health-care and social support. In contrast, the Latin Sephardic population in South Florida is more dispersed and less organized as a single ethnic enclave. Instead, it functions as a dynamic hub for individuals, family networks and smaller groups connected by shared cultural backgrounds. Traditional, Orthodox and Chabad synagogues often serve as the gravitational centers of communal life.

These communities also differ in how they address social challenges that arise with migration and evolve over time—such as elder care, poverty, mental health, and addiction. The Syrian community, with its long-established institutions, is better equipped to respond to these

needs. Among Persian, Bukharian, and Latin Sephardic Jews, institutional responses are still developing. Cultural norms can also make it difficult to address issues like addiction and mental health openly.

Each community has distinct internal dynamics as well. The Persian community, while broadly socially and politically conservative, includes a sizable secular segment and a small but notable progressive wing, especially among younger members. The Latin Sephardic presence in South Florida stands out for its geographic spread and fluidity, shaped more by overlapping cultural ties than by formal institutions.



Conclusions

The findings in this report mark an exciting and significant step forward in understanding the diversity, complexity, and evolving nature of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish identities and experiences in the United States. While historically underrepresented in mainstream US Jewish institutional life, many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews have built strong, vibrant communities that maintain deep familial, religious, and cultural traditions. Their experiences—shaped by unique migration histories, geopolitical contexts, and communal structures—offer invaluable perspectives that enrich the broader Jewish landscape. As interest in these communities grows, this study contributes to the development of a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of Jewish life in America.

Our research focused on neighborhood-based Sephardic communities characterized by dense, multiplex networks—where family, religious, and social ties overlap—creating strong communal bonds that reinforce continuity and tradition. Social network theory suggests that such tight-knit structures strengthen communal norms and values, a pattern that remains evident across the communities studied. Alongside this cohesion, many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews demonstrate strong commitments to traditional family structures, religious values, and support for Israel, often aligning them with more conservative political and social positions than the broader American Jewish population.

Jewish communal organizations, educators, and researchers have an important opportunity to build on this momentum and deepen engagement with Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Expanding frameworks of Jewish diversity beyond US racial and ethnic categories, recognizing both the strengths and institutional barriers faced by these communities, and increasing support for Sephardic-led and Sephardic-serving initiatives will help create a more representative and inclusive Jewish communal future. While no single approach can fully capture the range of Sephardic and Mizrahi experiences, this growing field of study signals meaningful progress toward integrating their voices, histories, and leadership into Jewish communal and scholarly spaces.

Recommendations: Addressing Diversity Within Diversity

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS

Based on the study's empirical findings and insights, we offer actionable recommendations for practitioners and researchers seeking deeper engagement with Sephardic Jews.⁵ The recommendations balance nuance with complexity, and are neither exhaustive nor final but instead provide a foundation for further exploration. To reflect the diversity within Sephardic and Mizrahi populations, we emphasize examples and frameworks designed to help organizations and those who lead and work in them think and act more inclusively.

The recommendations are framed by five suggested paradigm shifts in how practitioners and researchers should approach inclusion and diversity work in Jewish communal spaces:

→ From US Categories to Integrated US Jewish Frameworks

→ From Marginalization to Recognition

→ From Singular Values to Value Pluralism

→ From Ashkenormativity to Jewish Diversity

→ From One-Size-Fits-All to Adaptive Inclusion

While these recommendations were developed for those who lead and work in organizations—specifically Ashkenazi-majority organizations—significant change also happens outside formal organizational spaces in families, informal networks, and broader cultural and societal shifts. These recommendations strive for meaningful organizational change, but we also hope practitioners will carry the message of inclusivity and deeper engagement with Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews beyond their organizational walls.

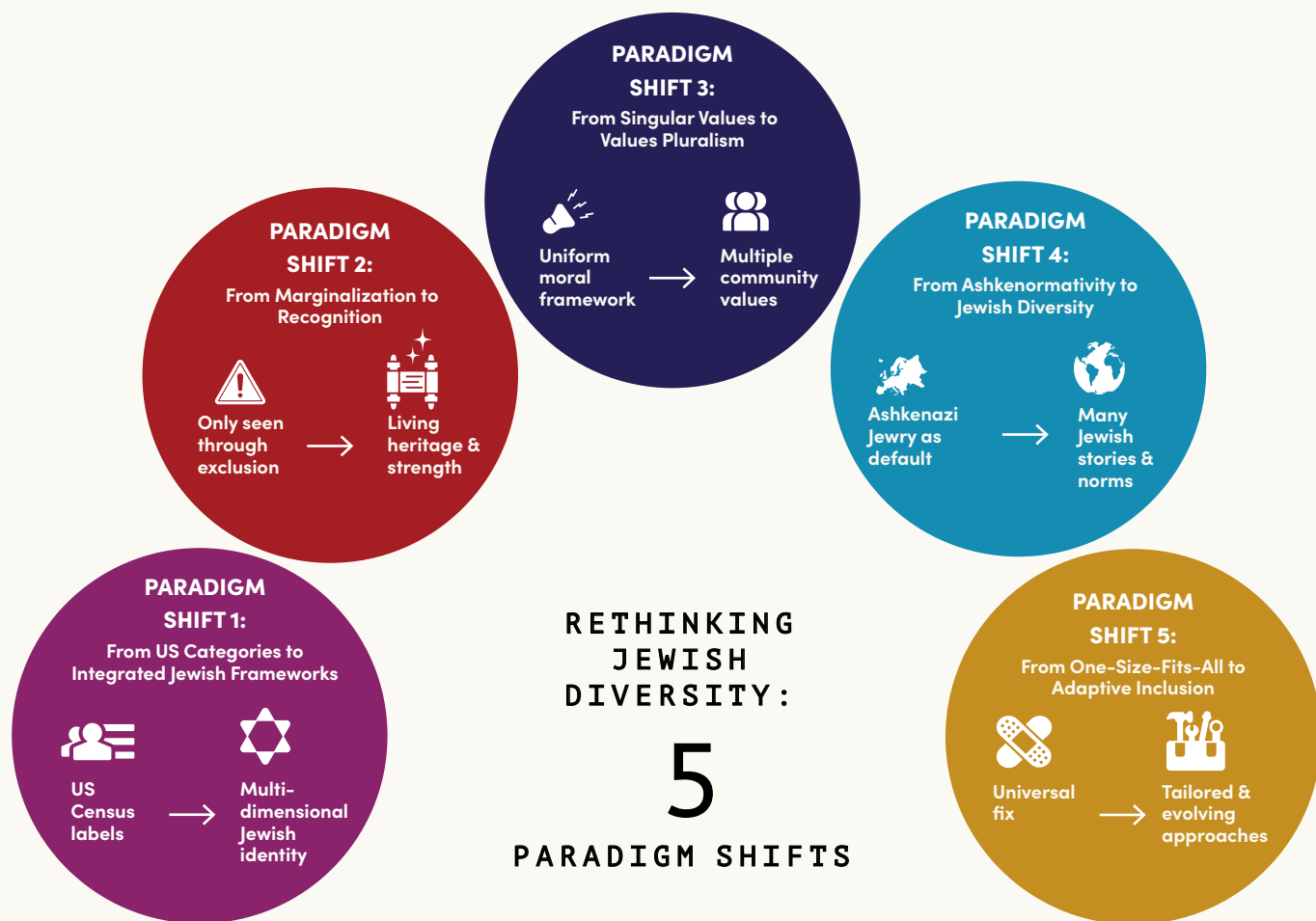


Paradigm Shifts: A New Vision of Jewish Diversity

Diversity efforts in Ashkenazi-majority Jewish spaces often rely on frameworks that do not adequately reflect the experiences of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States. Before offering specific practitioner recommendations, we describe five paradigm shifts for approaching inclusion and diversity work in Jewish communal spaces. While these shifts are principally informed by the experiences and needs of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, they have implications for the American Jewish community more broadly (including Ashkenazi or Ashkenazi-majority spaces and institutions), particularly regarding engagement with immigrant communities and other minority Jewish populations.

Creating inclusive Jewish spaces requires a thoughtful balance between respecting distinct communal needs and fostering broader connections. While not every Jewish space needs to fully accommodate all Sephardic and Mizrahi traditions, every institution should approach inclusion with intentionality and cultural understanding. These recommendations offer a framework for meaningful engagement that acknowledges the richness and complexity of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish life.

As Jewish institutions continue to evolve, the work of building more inclusive spaces remains ongoing. Leaders and organizations dedicated to this work should commit to continued learning, regular assessment, and authentic partnership with Sephardic and Mizrahi communities.



Paradigm Shift #1:

FROM US CATEGORIES TO INTEGRATED US JEWISH FRAMEWORKS

AVOID

Viewing diversity in Jewish spaces solely through US racial and ethnic categories, which assumes that:

- US racial and ethnic classifications (e.g., census race/ethnicity options) fully capture Jewish experiences and define Jewish diversity
- US diversity models can be directly applied to all Jewish communities globally
- Ashkenazi Jews are inherently “white,” while Sephardic/Mizrahi Jews are inherently “people of color” or “Jews of color”

CONSIDER

Jewish diversity requires frameworks that recognize:

- The complex intersections of ancestry, ethnicity, race, religion, and culture
- Migration patterns and geopolitical histories that shape identities, perspectives, practices and communal structures (e.g., Muslim-majority countries of origin)
- The central role of family origins and communal networks in shaping Jewish identity

Paradigm Shift #2:

FROM MARGINALIZATION TO RECOGNITION

AVOID

Viewing Sephardic and Mizrahi US Jews only through the lens of:

- Exclusion, marginalization, and victimhood narratives
- Barriers and challenges to integrating into Jewish communities and US society
- Mizrahi Jews in Israel, and thus conflating their experiences with those of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the US

CONSIDER

Supporting Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews requires recognizing:

- Their rich traditions and deep and vibrant religious and intellectual heritage that has made enduring contributions to Jewish life
- The distinct strengths, resilience, and entrepreneurial innovations that shape their communities today
- Strong Sephardic and Mizrahi communal identities, even as marginalization, barriers and biases persist within Ashkenazi-majority institutional frameworks

Paradigm Shift #3:

FROM SINGULAR VALUES TO VALUES PLURALISM

AVOID

Creating inclusion projects that assume:

- Universal agreement with or advocacy for a single set of values (e.g., liberal values)
- Consensus on the same theories and tools for inclusion (e.g., diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) frameworks)
- Individualism and the sovereign Jewish self as universally accepted moral frameworks

CONSIDER

Creating inclusion projects that recognize and allow for:

- Community-focused approaches that emphasize collective identity
- Sensitivity to cultural norms and taboos across different Jewish communities
- The diversity of values, religious perspectives, and political views within Jewish communities, encompassing both liberal and traditional approaches

Paradigm Shift #4:

FROM ASHKENORMATIVITY TO JEWISH DIVERSITY

AVOID

Centering Judaism in the US exclusively around:

- European Jewish experiences as the dominant narrative and Ashkenazi cultural norms as the default
- Yiddish as the primary language of Jewish tradition and ancestry
- Denominational structures and institutional affiliations as the only legitimate forms of Jewish identity and engagement
- European Holocaust narratives as the central framework for Jewish memory

CONSIDER

Understanding Judaism in the US as encompassing:

- Multiple historical experiences beyond the European context
- Diverse cultural expressions and norms across Jewish communities, including a range of languages like Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and Persian
- Varied religious practices and different models of religious organization
- Numerous forms of communal affiliation and engagement beyond institutional settings

Paradigm Shift #5:

FROM ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL TO ADAPTIVE INCLUSION

AVOID

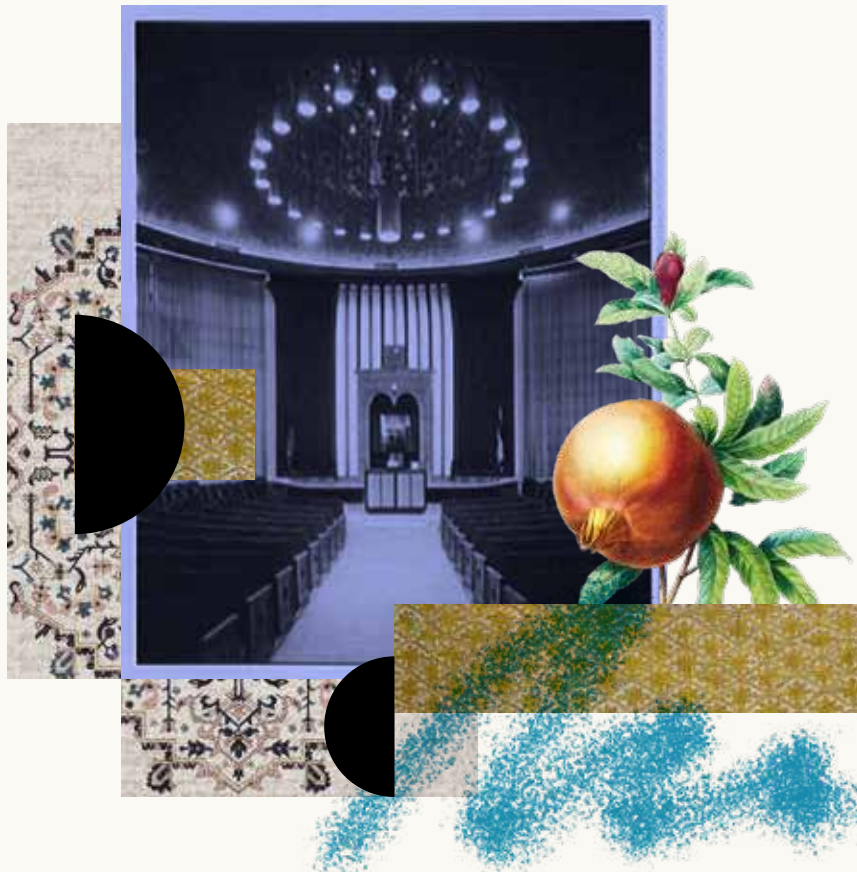
Assuming that in the process of expanding inclusion to underrepresented populations:

- Shared priorities and universal frameworks and solutions will be effective for all Jewish communities
- A single, generic approach will succeed across diverse groups
- One representative voice can speak for an entire underrepresented community
- Tensions can be eliminated rather than managed

CONSIDER

Embracing the complexity and challenges of inclusion work by recognizing that:

- Inclusion requires acknowledging complexity and difference
- Conflicting priorities must be engaged with and balanced
- Multiple adaptive approaches are necessary for effective inclusion
- A commitment to ongoing learning is essential for meaningful progress



Institutional Recommendations

Creating a more inclusive Jewish environment for Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews requires a nuanced understanding of the diverse range of Jewish institutional and organizational spaces, which vary widely in structure, demographics, and goals. Each institution faces distinct challenges and opportunities, necessitating tailored integration strategies while maintaining consistent inclusion principles across organizational categories. We first present recommendations for those wanting to engage more deeply with (a) Sephardic Jews in Sephardic-majority and Sephardic-led spaces and (b) Sephardic Jews in Ashkenazi-majority and Ashkenazi-led spaces, followed by specific recommendations for practitioners in various types of Jewish organizations, including broad communal organizations, service providers, philanthropic institutions, and advocacy organizations.⁶

SEPHARDIC-MAJORITY OR SEPHARDIC-LED SPACES

Many Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews report a desire to have their own spaces and institutions that primarily serve them while preserving and advancing their distinct traditions and practices. Examples include Sephardic day schools and synagogues, which often serve as central cultural and religious hubs within their communities. What follows are key considerations for Ashkenazi-led organizations or institutions interested in supporting or collaborating with these spaces:

- **Analyze Community Needs:** Understand and analyze the specific needs, practices, and challenges of these institutions to develop tailored collaboration strategies rather than generic approaches.

- **Respect the Desire for Independence:** Acknowledge and support when Sephardic-led organizations choose to develop their own programming to serve their communities in ways that reflect their unique needs and traditions.
- **Engage Community Leadership:** Build strong relationships and identify shared objectives by working directly with trusted Sephardic and Mizrahi community leaders.
- **Verify Cultural Terms:** Seek guidance about institutional and leadership self-identification and use terminology that authentically reflects communal practices.
- **Respect Cultural Values:** Design collaboration strategies that respect socially conservative values common in many Sephardic and Mizrahi communities.
- **Design Support Services:** Develop community-specific resources (such as mental health programming) that account for cultural sensitivities, stigmas, and traditional support systems.
- **Support Institutional Development:** Strengthen emerging and under-resourced Sephardic-led organizations by providing targeted infrastructure development and professionalization support.

ASHKENAZI-MAJORITY OR ASHKENAZI-LED SPACES

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews often partake (or seek to partake) in “mainstream” Jewish life and institutions, particularly where their communities are not as well-established or well-resourced. In Ashkenazi-led institutions with Sephardic and Mizrahi participation—such as Ashkenazi-founded day schools, summer camps, congregational schools, and synagogues—intentional efforts are needed to ensure they feel welcome and included. What follows are key considerations for leaders of Ashkenazi-majority organizations or institutions interested in supporting or collaborating with these constituents:

- **Revisit Jewish Peoplehood Narratives:**
Prioritize a broad and holistic vision for Jewish peoplehood that seeks to integrate Sephardic

and Mizrahi Jews as an essential part of the Jewish communal fabric.

- **Map Community Demographics:**
Survey the institutions’ participants to determine their ancestors’ countries of origin, immigration time to the US, and other relevant characteristics.
- **Monitor Institutional Progress:**
Continuously evaluate how Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews experience the institution.
- **Cultural Awareness Training:**
Provide cultural awareness training for Ashkenazi leadership and staff.



- **Enhance Learning Content:**
Integrate Sephardic and Mizrahi histories, frameworks such as *masortiyut*, and MENA Jewish experiences into curricula to benefit all populations served.
- **Honor Religious Diversity:**
Structure religious services, educational programs, and community engagement to accommodate practices outside the normative Ashkenazi (including denominational) frameworks.
- **Adapt Ritual Practices:**
Maintain institutional standards while incorporating diverse traditions (for example by offering parallel “edot Hamizrah” prayer books and providing education about ritual differences).
- **Build Culturally Competent Teams:**
Across all leadership levels, recruit Sephardic and Mizrahi educators, clergy, and decision-makers, or non-Sephardic/Mizrahi individuals with strong cultural competency in Sephardic and Mizrahi communities.
- **Create Lasting Partnerships:**
Embed Sephardic and Mizrahi traditions into daily operations through co-created programs, liturgy integration, and learning opportunities.
- **Prioritize Family Connections:**
Structure programming to accommodate extended family bonds and communal relationships central to Sephardic and Mizrahi culture.

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Structure programming to accommodate extended family bonds and communal relationships.

- **Adapt Lay Leadership Models:**
Develop leadership structures that embrace volunteer styles common in many Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, such as entrepreneurial, relationship-driven, and less bureaucratic approaches to leadership.
- **Apply Proven Models:**
Draw insights from successful examples like Seattle Hebrew Academy’s dual Sephardic-Ashkenazi curriculum to create inclusive frameworks that honor diverse traditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SPECIFIC TYPES OF AMERICAN JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS

Many organizations claim and aim to serve or represent the entire Jewish community while being overwhelmingly Ashkenazi-led and informed by Ashkenazi norms in practice. This section focuses on national and local organizations seeking to be more inclusive of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, such as (1) communal organizations like Hillel, Chabad, and Birthright, (2) service providers like Jewish Federation agencies and Jewish Family Services, (3) philanthropic organizations, and (4) advocacy organizations like ADL and AJC. Some of these approaches may help inform broader conversations about inclusivity for minority communities. What follows are key considerations for leaders of these organizations seeking to better serve or collaborate with Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews.

COMMUNAL ORGANIZATIONS

- **Evaluate Service Scope:**
Regularly assess whether activities, policies, and spaces reflect the diverse needs and traditions of Sephardic and Mizrahi participants.
- **Advance Staff Knowledge:**
Educate personnel on Sephardic and Mizrahi histories, communal structures, and traditions to enhance organizational inclusion.



To enable religious expression facilitate Sephardic-specific prayer services, speakers, and traditions.

- **Understand Different Perspectives:**
Consider diverse social views and political priorities that reflect Sephardic and Mizrahi values when developing initiatives.
- **Integrate Cultural Practices:**
Incorporate Sephardic and Mizrahi holidays, narratives, and observances naturally throughout organizational programming, ideally with inputs from or in partnership with Sephardic and Mizrahi participants and professionals.
- **Diversify Language Choices:**
Incorporate heritage words not only from Yiddish but also words popular in contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi communities from Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and other Jewish languages.
- **Expand Leadership Diversity:**
Across all leadership levels, recruit Sephardic and Mizrahi educators, clergy, and decision-makers, or non-Sephardic/Mizrahi individuals with strong cultural competency in Sephardic and Mizrahi communities.
- **Enable Religious Expression:**
Facilitate Sephardic-specific prayer services, speakers, and traditions.

SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS

- **Assess Audience Demographics:**
Assess whether your organization serves (or should serve) Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews by exploring community needs and identifying partners for effective engagement.

- **Honor Diverse Traditions:**
Create programs reflecting varied cultural and religious norms while avoiding standardized approaches that may not serve specific communities.
- **Support Immigrant Communities:**
Address the unique challenges faced by Sephardic and Mizrahi immigrants through programs that respect family centrality, conservative values, communal pride, and religious observance.
- **Enable Language Access:**
Where applicable, provide services in Hebrew, Persian, Spanish, French, and Russian (and other relevant languages) to support older adults and those with language barriers.



ELEVATE COMMUNITY NARRATIVES :

Amplify Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish histories and experiences to counter misconceptions about Jewish heritage



DIVERSIFY LANGUAGE CHOICES :

Incorporate heritage words popular in contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi communities from Ladino, Judeo-Arabic, and other Jewish languages, instead of just Yiddish

- **Strengthen Community Connections:**
Invest in culturally-informed marketing and community outreach to increase service awareness and overcome stigma and unfamiliarity with agencies.
- **Build Cultural Competency:**
Recruit professionals with expertise in Sephardic and Mizrahi culture and traditions while avoiding assumptions about religious observance, socio-economic background, or racial identity.
- **Ensure Inclusive Leadership:**
Partner with Sephardic and Mizrahi leaders to develop appropriate services and ensure representation across all decision-making bodies.
- **Identify and Support Community Liaisons:**
Proactively identify and nurture individuals within Sephardic and Mizrahi communities—such as those entering mental health or social service fields—who can serve as trusted bridges between service providers and community members who prefer to engage with insiders.

PHILANTHROPIC ORGANIZATIONS

- **Assess Institutional Objectives:**
Examine organizational goals for serving and understanding diverse Jewish communities across the United States and how Sephardic and Mizrahi populations may fit within those goals.
- **Create Core Resources:**
Support the development of comprehensive educational materials covering global and local Sephardic/Mizrahi Judaism, law, history, and traditions for use across Jewish institutions nationwide seeking to be more inclusive of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews.
- **Fund Essential Research:**
Support studies that address knowledge gaps about US Sephardic and Mizrahi communities to inform institutional engagement, policy, and funding decisions.
- **Build Cultural Competency:**
Implement educational initiatives that equip Ashkenazi-led organizations with the knowledge and tools to effectively engage Sephardic and Mizrahi communities.
- **Strengthen Community Infrastructure:**
Help Sephardic-led organizations develop professional capacity by improving governance, fundraising, and operational systems.

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Partner with Sephardic and Mizrahi leaders to develop appropriate services and ensure representation across all decision-making bodies.

- **Expand Leadership Opportunities:**
Actively recruit and develop Sephardic and Mizrahi leaders to ensure meaningful representation in Jewish institutional leadership at decision-making levels.
- **Develop Professional Skills:**
Create tailored leadership development and mentorship programs that support Sephardic and Mizrahi professionals working in Jewish organizations while fostering connections between Sephardic and Mizrahi leaders and broader Jewish nonprofit networks.
- **Increase Community Resources:**
Fund under-resourced Jewish life initiatives in Sephardic and Mizrahi communities to provide benefits and support sustainable growth.
- **Ensure Representation:**
Create meaningful alliances and bonds with Sephardic and Mizrahi organizations that enable genuine representation in communal policy decisions.
- **Enhance Staff Knowledge:**
Provide staff with resources about Sephardic and Mizrahi history, contemporary antisemitism in MENA regions, and the political and social experiences of these communities.
- **Include MENA Voices:**
Incorporate Sephardic and Mizrahi viewpoints in shaping conversations about Israel and MENA, antisemitism, and Jewish security concerns.
- **Elevate Community Narratives:**
Amplify Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish histories and experiences to counter misconceptions about Jewish heritage.

ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS

- **Research Local Communities:**
Study the diverse traditions and perspectives of regional Sephardic and Mizrahi populations to ensure programs reflect their distinct experiences.
- **Build Authentic Partnerships:**
Engage directly with Sephardic and Mizrahi community leaders to understand priorities and challenges while ensuring terminology and frameworks remain inclusive and relevant.

ENHANCE STAFF KNOWLEDGE :

Provide staff with resources about Sephardic and Mizrahi history, contemporary antisemitism in MENA regions, and the political and social experiences of these communities



Research Recommendations

Just as Jewish institutions vary in their structure and goals, research on Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews requires methodological approaches that recognize diverse identities, experiences, and communal patterns. Effective research design must balance rigorous data collection with cultural sensitivity while addressing significant gaps in our understanding of these communities in the United States. The following recommendations offer guidance for researchers and institutions conducting studies of American Jews broadly and more specifically of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in America.

SURVEY RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Categorization in surveys

- Surveys should offer Sephardic and Mizrahi as distinct options alongside Ashkenazi and others when asking about Jewish identities and heritage.
- Respondents should always have the option to select more than one category and provide a write-in response.
- Survey instruments should avoid imposing definitions of Sephardic and Mizrahi, as these categories are fluid and evolving.

Denominational identification

- Ideally, researchers should include Sephardic and Mizrahi as additional categories in denominational questions that typically include options such as Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist, allowing respondents to select multiple options (e.g., Sephardic & Orthodox).
- If adding categories is not possible, a write-in option should always be available.

Cognitive testing of survey categories

- Researchers should conduct cognitive tests of commonly used questions and response options in Jewish identity research, ensuring they reflect how respondents actually self-identify.

Data analysis

- Researchers should not assume a direct relationship between Sephardic/Mizrahi identity and US racial/ethnic categories. For example, percentages of “diverse” Jews should not aggregate Sephardic/Mizrahi populations with other racial or ethnic groups unless there is a demonstrated relationship or a clearly stated rationale for doing so.
- The categories Sephardic and especially Mizrahi are evolving and context-dependent. They carry multiple meanings (e.g., ancestry vs. practice) and



DESIGNING INCLUSIVE SURVEYS

Survey Design Basics for Sephardic
& Mizrahi Inclusion



- ▶ Offer distinct options when asking about Jewish identities and heritage
- ▶ Allow multiple selections and write-in responses
- ▶ Avoid rigid definitions—these categories are fluid and evolving

vary significantly across different communities and geographic locations. Any analysis should keep this in mind and not assume, for example, that Mizrahi responses in Florida correspond with those in NY.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Community sensitivity and context

- Researchers should avoid generalizing Sephardic/Mizrahi Jews as a monolithic group and should pay attention to local and communal distinctions.
- If studying MENA populations, researchers should engage with secondary literature from Israeli scholarship (often in Hebrew) and from other countries (e.g., France) about Mizrahim to gain a deeper contextual understanding.

Trust-building and cultural competency

- Qualitative research projects should be structured to allow for significant trust-building, particularly among socially conservative, insular, or immigrant communities. Trust-building strategies should be tailored to each community and not assumed to be universally applicable.
- Avoid academic jargon when recruiting respondents and communicate clearly and repeatedly about confidentiality.
- Note that research activities will have different meanings in different communities. For example, incentives such as gift cards may be welcomed in some communities but may create suspicion in others, and researchers should assess this in advance.

Framing and language sensitivity

- Researchers should develop cultural competency before conducting studies. Survey and interview questions should be adapted to reflect community norms and expectations. For example, instead of asking, “Where did you go to college?” ask, “What level of formal education did you receive?” In addition, ask



QUALITATIVE RESEARCH GROUND RULES

A few recommendations for culturally competent research



- ▶ Avoid treating Sephardic/Mizrahi Jews as a single group
- ▶ Avoid academic jargon—be clear and respectful
- ▶ Tailor trust-building strategies to each community

about volunteer and community work in contexts where these are significant social contributions.

- Labels and identity categories should be tested before use, as even basic terms like Sephardic or Orthodox can carry different meanings in different communities.
- Researchers should consider grounded theory approaches for studies on Jewish identity and observance to avoid imposing Ashkenazi-based assumptions.

Mixed methods research

- Where feasible and appropriate to implement, mixed methods approaches utilizing both quantitative and qualitative research methods that complement each other provide the most robust understanding of Sephardic and Mizrahi communities.
- At the same time, researchers should be aware that different data sources may contradict each other. For example, estimates of population sizes from surveys, organizational data, and community informants may differ widely from each other. More work is needed to understand and reconcile these discrepancies.



There is a need for expanded sociological and applied research on underexplored aspects of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish life in the US.

Methodological disclosures

- When reporting survey results, researchers should disclose important methodological information, such as sampling methods (probability or nonprobability) and frames, weighting to adjust achieved samples (if any), modes of survey data administration, and survey field dates.
- When reporting qualitative research, researchers should disclose details about their recruitment strategies, including efforts to reach individuals from communities that have historically had trust issues with researchers. This includes how participants were identified and approached, any measures taken to build trust and rapport, the role of community leaders or cultural brokers in the process, and considerations around language accessibility and informed consent. Additionally, researchers should discuss any barriers encountered in recruitment and how they triangulated data in their studies.

RESEARCH AGENDA: KEY CONTENT AREAS

There is a need for expanded sociological and applied research on underexplored aspects of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish life in the US. Key areas of focus should include:

- **Pre-1924 Sephardic Communities:**
Examine the social structures of long-established communities, such as Greek/Turkish Jews and Spanish-Portuguese Jews.
- **International Networks:**
Analyze the Sephardic and Mizrahi transnational networks and their connection to the United States. One example is Moroccan Jews, whose diaspora is divided into multiple communities, including Spanish-speaking and French-speaking communities, and whose migration patterns have made it a very international diaspora.
- **Sephardic Lineage & Rediscovery:**
Study the growing number of individuals who trace their ancestry to Sephardic Jews forcibly converted during the Inquisition. Some identify as Bnei Anusim, others as crypto-Jews, and some as descendants of conversos exploring their Jewish roots. Among them, some seek formal reintegration into Jewish life, while others engage with their heritage primarily as a historical or cultural connection.
- **Mizrahi Israeli Jews in the US:**
Investigate the integration, identity, and communal life of Mizrahi Israelis in America.
- **Integrated Individuals:**
Study the experiences of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews who participate in historically Ashkenazi spaces, including those who do not actively participate in Sephardic-specific communities, as well as how these historically Ashkenazi spaces are responding.
- **Mixed Families:**
Examine identity formation, cultural transmission, and belonging in families with mixed backgrounds, such as families with Sephardic, Ashkenazi, and non-Jewish heritage.

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States: Meanings, Identities, Experiences

INTRODUCTION

The Sephardic Jewish experience in the United States is chronologically long, geographically diverse, and thematically multifaceted. Conventional histories of American Jews often treat the colonial and early national periods as the “Sephardic” era, giving the impression that this marks the end of the Sephardic story in the US, rather than its beginning. This narrow focus on early arrivals has overshadowed the rich and diverse stories of Sephardic Jews who came long after the founding of the country. From the era of mass migration (circa 1880–1924) through the post-1965 liberalization of immigration policy, Sephardic Jews—who have often been identified by other categories, such as their country of origin or umbrella terms like Ottoman Jews—have continued to arrive in the US from Mediterranean Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Latin America.

Once here, Sephardic immigrants, like many other immigrant groups, reconstituted their communities and set about adapting to their new homeland. In doing so, they sought—and continue to seek—to balance ethnic and cultural continuity with integration into American society. For Sephardic Jews, though, there has been an added challenge of doing this in the shadow of the much larger Ashkenazi Jewish population, most of whom trace their ancestors to eastern European immigrants arriving at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Ashkenazi Jews and the vast institutional infrastructures they established have long dominated the public story of American Jewish life. Sephardic experiences, in contrast, have attracted little sustained attention.

In recent years, however, a growing interest in the Sephardic experience in the US has emerged, both in academic circles and Jewish communal organizations.

This interest—catalyzed in part by growing interest in the country’s reckoning with racial and ethnic diversity, marginalization, and underrepresentation in recent years—has complicated previous narratives and sharpened awareness of the absence of knowledge on these populations. This has brought to the surface important—and at times fundamental—questions about the terms Sephardic and Mizrahi. Where and when did these terms originate, and what do they mean today? Who do they refer to, and what do they signify for those who claim these identities and heritages? What is the background and timing of their immigration to the US? And what is the relationship between Sephardic and Mizrahi as categories and the common categories of race and ethnicity in the US?



Defining Sephardic

As indicated in the report's introduction, the categories of Sephardic and Mizrahi are dynamic, evolving, and have multiple meanings. In our work, we have tried when possible to privilege self-identification rather than assign categories to our interviewees. This section draws on existing literature about the terms Sephardic and Mizrahi and reflects the three most common ways our interviewees defined and understand the category of Sephardic. We then extended these three dimensions of meaning to also explain the most common ways of defining Mizrahi. While some individuals use only one of these meanings,

others referred or implied more than one simultaneously. By combining scholarly insights with the lived perspectives of our participants, we aim to provide a nuanced exploration of what these terms mean today.

ORIGINS

The term "Sepharad" originates from the biblical book of Obadiah (1:20), where it refers to a place where Jewish exiles from Jerusalem were said to have settled. Over time, Sepharad came to be associated with the Roman Empire's Hispania, the ancient name for the Iberian Peninsula. This evolved to include Muslim al-Andalus, Christian Spain, and eventually the modern nation-state of Spain. An ancient community, some Medieval Spanish Jews identified themselves with the Sepharad mentioned by the prophet: as descendants of nobility brought to Iberia after the destruction of the Second Temple. "Sepharad" thus came to represent not only a geographic region but also a vibrant Jewish civilization, encompassing the culture, communities, and traditions of medieval Iberian Jewry.

ANCESTRY

The term "Sephardic" can refer to Jews of Iberian or Spanish descent in their different dispersions. The migration of Sephardic Jews before and after their expulsions from Christian Spain and Portugal in the late 15th century spread Sephardic Jews all over the world, to other western European countries, notably the Netherlands and England, where Sephardic Jews established new communities, and to Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and North African locales where other Sephardic Jews resettled after migrating further eastward.



RELIGION

The term “Sephardic” can refer to Jews who identify with Sephardic religious tradition, one of two primary distinct yet complementary approaches to *Halakha* (Jewish law) and *minhag* (custom).

During the medieval period, two major centers of Jewish legal, intellectual, and religious thought emerged: Sephardic (rooted in Spain and spread by exiles) and Ashkenazi (centered in France and Germany). Deeply influenced by the cultural and religious traditions of the Iberian exiles, many Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and North African Jews who were not themselves direct descendants of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula came to adopt the religious culture and legal approach of Sephardic rabbis or Sephardic migrants to their regions.

The Shulhan Arukh, authored by Rabbi Yosef Karo in the 16th century, exemplifies the emergence of Sephardic and Ashkenazi traditions as complementary within Jewish law and custom. Karo’s work codified Sephardic halakhic rulings, and Rabbi Moses Isserles added glosses, known as the “Mappah” (literally: the “tablecloth”), detailing Ashkenazi customs where they diverged from Sephardic practice.

Today, the *Shulhan Arukh*, with Isserles’ annotations, remains a central text for both Sephardic and Ashkenazi

Jews, illustrating how these two primary traditions coexist as distinct yet complementary approaches to Jewish law and custom.

Sephardic *Halakha* and *minhag* were influenced by the Muslim societies in which many Jewish legal scholars and rabbis who saw themselves as links in Sephardic tradition lived, shaping common Sephardic practices such as eating *kitniyot* on Passover.⁶

Prominent figures such as Maimonides (12th century), Rabbi Yosef Karo (16th century), and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (20th century) exemplify legal and religious leadership rooted in Sephardic traditions, while also reflecting the significant internal diversity within these traditions. Notably, Sephardic Judaism, due to a variety of historical and geopolitical factors, did not develop denominational streams like Ashkenazi Jews in the United States.

Today, Sephardic religious practice is often associated with *masortiyut* (traditionalism), a form of Jewish observance and identification that challenges distinctions between religious observance and secularism by offering a spectrum of Jewish practice that blends fealty to traditional norms with diversity of observance.⁷ Sephardic and Ashkenazi siddurim also differ from each other in liturgical text, structure, customs, and vocalization, shaped by the historical and geographic influences on each community.⁸





DIFFERENT PATHS OF PRAYER

Sephardic and Ashkenazi prayer books (siddurim) reflect distinct traditions shaped by each community's unique historical and geographic journey. Differences in prayer appear in wording, cantillation, structure, customs, rituals, pronunciation, etc.

IDENTITY

The term “Sephardic” can refer to a social identity, particularly in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews, who make up the substantial majority of North American Jews. In premodern contexts such as Amsterdam, Italy, and Jerusalem, the term distinguished differences in religious practice, socio-economic status, and communal affiliations. In addition, one of the most significant aspects distinguishing Sephardic communities until the 19th century was language. Sephardim were typically referred to as Spanish-speaking Jews, and the linguistic marker of Ladino is crucial to understanding their identity.

In modern Jewish life—particularly in Israel and the US—Ashkenazi Jews have often held demographic dominance and shaped leadership, institutions, and cultural norms. As a result, the meaning of Sephardic has shifted in reaction. In the US, “Sephardic” has moved away from its original focus on Jews from Iberian Spain (who were among the earliest Jewish immigrants to the country) and has increasingly been used to describe non-Ashkenazi identity, simultaneously celebrating cultural vibrancy while reflecting a minority status within broader Jewish populations. Scholars note that this shift may also stem from efforts to distance Sephardic identity from Arab and other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) associations, particularly in postcolonial contexts.

Part of what this means is that, over time, some groups “became” Sephardic in America to distinguish themselves from an Ashkenazi majority. Internal distinctions, such as those between Moroccan Jews from Tangier and Tétouan, for instance, did not carry the same weight for outside observers. As such, in the US, many of these groups eventually adopted the term “Sephardic”—both because they followed Sephardic law and custom, and because the term became a pan-ethnic colloquialism for non-Ashkenazi Jews in America.

As with many intragroup dynamics, Sephardic groups in the US experienced bias and discrimination from the Ashkenazi majority. These biases manifested in various forms: sometimes rooted in class differences, at times in perceptions of “primitive” backgrounds, and occasionally in racialized distinctions. Ashkenazi Jews, who saw their own customs as the yardstick of Jewish life, often struggled to make sense of Jews whose practices, languages, and traditions were often very different. These painful episodes—spanning generations—strengthened, for many, an “othered” Sephardic identity that defines itself in relation to Ashkenazi norms.

In contemporary times, this relationship has evolved. Our research reveals a diversity of perspectives: for some, being Sephardic signifies marginalization within Ashkenazi-dominant spaces; for others, Sephardic identity is not inherently tied to marginalization. Some insist one can be a minority without experiencing marginalization, while others have built thriving Sephardic communities where they function as the majority.

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The term “Sephardic” can refer to a social identity, particularly in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews, who make up the substantial majority of North American Jews.

Defining Mizrahi

ORIGINS

The term “Mizrahi,” referring to Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, did not exist until the late 19th century. Broadly speaking, before and after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, hundreds of thousands of Jews from MENA regions immigrated to Israel. These Jews typically identified themselves by local origins, such as from Mashad (Iran) or Baghdad (Iraq), reflecting linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity. The dominant Ashkenazi group in Israel tended to view these communities monolithically, calling them *edot Hamizrah* (Communities of the East) and later as *Mizrahim* (Easterners). But the term was more than just a geographic marker.⁹ The label also carried derogatory connotations, implying a supposed lack of social, cultural, and economic development among Jews from the “Orient” (as it is sometimes translated), and *Mizrahi* came to denote a disadvantaged ethnic minority of Jews from MENA countries.

Although initially imposed by Ashkenazim, the term *Mizrahi* was later reclaimed and appropriated by MENA Jews, beginning with activists and academics, and has gained increasing prominence in public discourse, particularly among the younger generation in the last decades. In this sense, the development of the terms Mizrahi in Israel and Sephardic in the United States share a common pattern. They reflect how encounters between groups in new social contexts resulting from immigration can generate new meanings for terms that differ from how populations used them prior to immigrating.

ANCESTRY

The term “Mizrahi” can refer to Israeli Jews from MENA regions. Today, about half of all Israeli Jews have some Mizrahi ancestry.

RELIGION

The term Mizrahi is occasionally used to refer to the religious practice and customs of Israeli Jews originally from the MENA region. However, Mizrahi more often connotes a historical Jewish experience related to ethnic origin, migration, and social status in Israel, and Mizrahim in Israel generally align religiously with Sephardic Jewish law and customs, in particular with

NOTEWORTHY FACTS

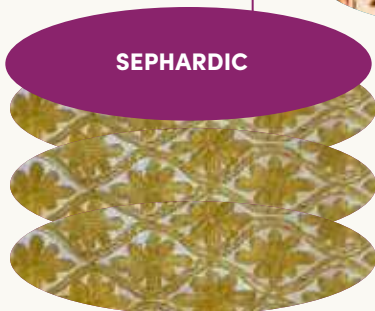
- ➔ The term “Mizrahi” emerged in the late 19th century and became a dominant category in Israel in the second half of the 20th century to refer to Jews from MENA regions
- ➔ Most Mizrahi Jews in Israel align with Sephardic Jewish law and tradition
- ➔ “Mizrahi” became more common in US discourse in the 2000s, mainly among younger Jews and academics

MEANINGS OF SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI

- Sephardic**

 - ▶ Emerged to describe Jewish communities and civilization in the medieval Iberian experience
 - ▶ The label expanded as Sephardic Jews fled or were expelled and migrated around the world, creating new Sephardic communities
 - ▶ The term Sephardic is associated with a specific halakhic tradition, liturgy, and other aspects of Jewish life
 - ▶ Today, in the US, most Jews with Iberian or MENA descent use the label Sephardic
 - ▶ Today in Israel, many Mizrahi Jews identify as Sephardic in ritual practice. Haredi Jews of MENA and Iberian descent typically self-identify as Sephardic, not Mizrahi.
- Mizrahi**

 - ▶ New term that emerged in the late 19th century and became more widely used in Israel after 1948
 - ▶ Refers to MENA Jews and has a history tied to the marginalization of MENA Jews by Ashkenazi-dominated society in Israel
 - ▶ Emphasizes ethnic, migration-based, and sociopolitical identity
 - ▶ Today in Israel, Mizrahi is commonly used by non-Haredi MENA Jews to self-identify, and often overlaps with Sephardic practice
 - ▶ Mizrahi is less commonly used in the US, but its use is growing



their traditionalist orientation to religious practice. This means that many will self-identify as Mizrahim even as they will also speak of the Sephardic religious tradition as their own. The ethnic connotation of the term Mizrahi helps explain why most Haredi Jews in Israel of MENA descent prefer the term Sephardic over Mizrahi, as reflected in the Haredi political party Shas. The acronym Shas, which has had different iterations over time, includes the term “*Sephardic* [Torah] Guardians.”

IDENTITY

In Israel, the term Mizrahi can refer to a social identity, particularly in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews. As noted, the term was initially imposed by Ashkenazim but over time was reclaimed by Mizrahim themselves. Mizrahim in Israel faced systemic inequities during the state’s early decades, including marginalization and economic disparities. Today, while the gaps between the two groups have narrowed in some social sectors—and have been further blurred by intermarriage—Mizrahi Jews still face disparities in socio-economic achievements across many areas of Israeli life, including university matriculation, income levels, and entry into elite army units. These disparities reinforce the use of the term as a form of identity that Mizrahim use to distinguish themselves from Ashkenazim.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE TERM MIZRAHI IN THE US

In Israel, the term Mizrahi was first used by academics and activists and subsequently became widely embraced in the population, a dynamic shaped by many factors, including a long history of shared responses to both state and popular discrimination. In the US, its adoption has been later, slower, and not as widespread. Based on conversations with scholars and activists, we surmise that “Mizrahi” entered American Jewish discourse in the early 2000s, introduced by academics and activists who sought to link Sephardic Jews in the US to Mizrahi identity and/or the Mizrahi struggle in Israel. The adoption of the term has varied.

The adoption of the term Mizrahi varies across age groups, political affiliations, and regions. Among our interviewees, it is more common as a form of personal

and social identity among younger, politically and socially progressive Jews, as well as those on the West Coast compared to those on the East Coast. Notably, it has been adopted by some US Jews with Middle Eastern or North African roots who feel uncomfortable with the term “Sephardic” due to their lack of Spanish or Iberian ancestry. For them, it serves as a way to distinguish themselves from both Sephardic and Ashkenazi counterparts.

Mizrahi is also sometimes joined with Sephardic, typically in the form of “Sephardic/Mizrahi,” a combination that acknowledges differences in the ancestral lineages each term signifies and simultaneously provides a hybrid identity, with connotations of marginalization, that

stands in contrast to the Ashkenazi Jews who comprise the majority of the US Jewish population. Confronting the multiple meanings and diverse usage of each category, survey researchers in the US have increasingly adopted the combined term “Sephardic/Mizrahi.”

Nevertheless, Sephardic remains the more widely used term in the US, and as a reflection of that, this report primarily, though not exclusively, uses the term Sephardic. An important exception to this—which this report does not explore directly—are Mizrahi Israeli Jews who have moved from Israel to the United States. Their experiences can provide important insights and deserve consideration as well.



Sephardic Jews in the United States: Historical Overview

EARLY IMMIGRATION

In the colonial and early national period of the US, Western European Jews of Iberian descent established a broad Atlantic network of small but cohesive Sephardic communities reaching from the Caribbean Islands to Rhode Island. These communities were founded by Jews whose families fled Spain and Portugal's expulsions, inquisitions, and forced conversions to Catholicism. Many had to migrate repeatedly, as their new host countries often adopted the Inquisition as well. Fleeing the Portuguese Inquisition after the Netherlands lost control of Brazil, some Jews found refuge—albeit not always a fully welcoming one—in Dutch and British colonies.

Most histories of Jews in the United States begin with the arrival of such Jewish refugees in New Amsterdam (later New York City) in 1654, marking the earliest known Jewish settlement in what would become the US. This Sephardic migration preceded the establishment of German Jewish communities in the mid-19th century and the massive wave of Eastern European Jews in the late 19th century, which solidified



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL, EST.1654

the first Jewish congregation in the US, founded by Sephardic Jews fleeing the Inquisition

Ashkenazi Jews as the dominant Jewish group in the United States—already a majority by the 1820s.

Sephardic Jewish life in the United States followed that of London and Amsterdam, featuring a unique “Spanish and Portuguese” liturgy and ritual, distinct from other Sephardic communities worldwide. By the mid-18th century, Sephardic synagogues were established in places such as Barbados, Jamaica, St. Thomas, Savannah, Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, and Rhode Island. Sephardic Jews played a critical role in shaping early Jewish life in the United States. For example, they established the Touro Synagogue, built in 1763 in Newport, Rhode Island. It remains the oldest synagogue building still standing in the US and North America.

IMMIGRATION IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Jews began immigrating to the US. These were primarily two groups from the Ottoman Empire: Ladino-speaking Jews from Greece and Turkey, and Syrian Jews. They often found they had little in common with the established Spanish-Portuguese communities.

These new immigrants were often stigmatized by the now-dominant Ashkenazi population, who negatively referred to them as “Oriental”—a term that some within these communities had used to describe themselves. Many still retained specific identities tied to their countries—and often cities—of origin, such as Greek, Turkish, or Syrian. Language further distinguished Ladino-speaking Turkish and Greek Jews from Arabic-speaking Syrian Jews. By eventually adopting the Sephardic label, they helped drive the term Sephardic toward a more expansive, pan-ethnic meaning in the US.

Approximately 20,000–30,000 Sephardic Jews arrived during this period, seeking the economic and political opportunities of America. While adjusting to their new homes, immigrants still sought the familiarity and comfort of their traditions and so individual communities remained largely separate, often with more differences than similarities. Furthermore, Ladino-speaking Jews tended to assimilate more rapidly into mainstream Ashkenazi culture, while Syrians maintained stronger ties to their unique communal identity. Both groups, nonetheless, worked to preserve their minority-within-a-minority heritage.

The 1924 Immigration Act severely restricted immigration to the United States, establishing discriminatory quotas that favored Western and Northern Europeans. It limited or effectively barred immigration from places such as Asia, Eastern Europe—and most importantly for the subjects of this study, drastically limited immigrants from countries in the former Ottoman Empire.¹² Despite this, some Sephardic Jews still managed to immigrate—often through

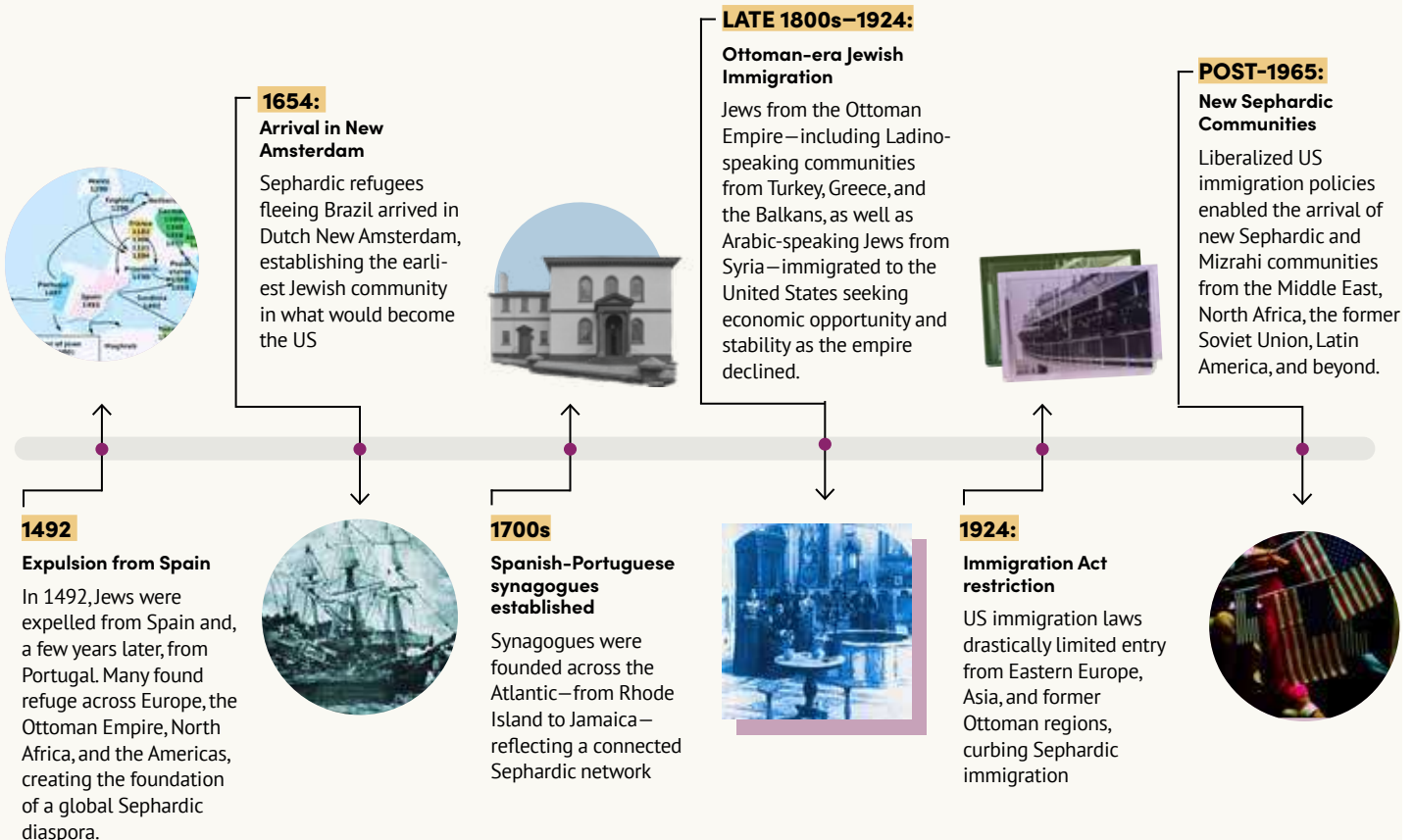
intermediary stops in Latin American countries, provisions for family reunification, or acquiring refugee status. Some who arrived on refugee visas were Sephardic Holocaust survivors, but the decimation of Balkan and Greek Sephardic communities during the Holocaust dealt a huge blow to Ladino-speaking Jewry and erased the potential for large-scale postwar immigration to the US.

By the mid-20th century, most Sephardic Jews in the United States fell into three main groups. The largest was the Ladino-speaking community, spread across the country. The Syrian community, concentrated in New York. Third, there was the centuries-old Spanish and Portuguese Sephardic community whose prominent place within America had faded.

POST-1965 IMMIGRATION

Starting in 1965, changes to US immigration policy became more liberalized for immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. These immigration

KEY MOMENTS SHAPING SEPHARDIC MIGRATION TO THE US



reforms played a significant role in shaping the Sephardic landscape in the United States. The four communities we chose to profile in our study illustrate these dynamics, reinforcing the usage of the term Sephardic as a pan-ethnic identity in the US. Here, we offer a brief historical overview of each community's migration to the US in chronological order of when these groups began to arrive. Further in this report, the portraits also explain why we chose some labels over other—for example, Persian Jews instead of Iranian and Latin Jews instead of Hispanic.

Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn, NY

Syrian Jews began leaving Syria during the late 1800s and early 1900s, when the region was part of the Ottoman Empire. They were primarily driven by the decline of the empire and an increasingly struggling economy. A small Syrian Jewish community was established in New York, which grew as families joined relatives who had already immigrated. Although the 1924 Immigration Act largely halted new arrivals, some still managed to come. This community is included in our profiles shaped by post-1965 immigration because one of its defining characteristics is that it became a hub for Jews fleeing anti-Jewish persecution and instability in neighboring countries. These countries, once closely connected under the Ottoman Empire, shared constant migration, similar Arabic dialects, and families often spread between them. Key waves of immigration included Jews who fled or were expelled from Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, Jews escaping the civil war in Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s, and Jews who were finally allowed to leave Syria in the 1990s after enduring decades of anti-Jewish state persecution, including restrictions on emigration. These successive layers of immigration helped shape what is now known as the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn.

Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles, CA

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran marked significant rupture for the Persian Jewish population, made up of ancient communities with thousands of years of history. Before the revolution, Iran had a strong Jewish population, primarily concentrated in cities like Tehran,



Iсфаهان, همدان, and شیراز. However, the revolution led to the rise of an Islamist government under Ayatollah Khomeini, which brought significant changes to the status of religious minorities, shifting away from the more secular conditions that had previously offered them relative stability. Moreover, the Ayatollah's vision for Iran was interwoven with aggressive anti-Zionism and opposition to the State of Israel. These factors created what most Jews felt was a hostile and even dangerous environment filled with fear and uncertainty. These conditions propelled the majority of the Persian Jewish community to flee or leave the country, seeking safety and stability in countries like the United States, Israel, and Europe. Many Persian Jews settled in Los Angeles, forming one of the largest Persian Jewish diasporas outside Iran, as well as in other cities such as New York and London. While the majority left, a small Jewish community remains in Iran today, navigating life under the Islamic Republic. Persian Jews have an ancient tradition and a unique history shaped by their prosperity in secular Iran, setting them apart from other MENA and Sephardic communities while also sharing some similarities.



BUKHARIAN REALITY UNDER SOVIET INFLUENCE

Although the USSR imposed harsh anti-religion legislation, these restrictions were not equally enforced in every region of the Soviet Union. Bukharian Jews were able to maintain their religious traditions and Jewish communal life, despite being under Soviet rule.

Bukharian Jewish community in Queens, NY

Bukharian Jews, whose roots stretch back hundreds of years, trace their origins to Central Asia, specifically the emirate of Bukhara, which encompassed parts of modern-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. While influenced over time by Persian and Sephardic traditions, Bukharian Jews became largely isolated from other Jewish communities by the eighteenth century due to regional upheaval. Under Russian control in the late nineteenth century, the Russian language became increasingly prevalent among Bukharians. Uniquely, their region did not face the same Soviet restrictions as other areas, allowing them to retain

more of their Jewish identity and religious observance even while under Soviet rule. Immigration to the United States occurred in two waves: a small one in the 1970s and a larger one in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as economic instability and rising antisemitism following the Soviet Union's collapse prompted many Jews to seek new opportunities. Bukharian Jews dispersed globally, with significant populations settling in Israel and Queens, New York.

Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida

Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and North African Jews immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century but also moved to other destinations such as France, Israel, Canada, and countries across Latin America, where they established small yet vibrant communities. Most sought better economic prospects, while others fled rising anti-Jewish sentiment in their home countries, particularly after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Often, language reflective of colonial rule in MENA countries shaped where MENA Jews would migrate. For instance, Latin America was especially appealing to Moroccan Jews from regions of northern and southern Morocco colonized by Spain, as they identified with Spanish culture and were familiar with the Spanish language. Similarly, Turkish Jews from Istanbul and Silivri found their way to Cuba, confident that their knowledge of Ladino would help them.¹⁰ In recent decades, political and economic instability in Latin America, as well as communist and anti-democratic regimes such as those in Cuba and Venezuela, have driven many of these Jews to immigrate to the United States, with a significant number settling in South Florida. Latin Sephardic Jewish immigrants in this region combine Sephardic and Hispanic identities, reflecting diversity in their Sephardic cultural heritage and their countries of origin in Latin America. For many Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida, the United States represents the second stage of their families' migration journey, following their initial departure from MENA countries.

Sephardic Religious Practice in the US

Sephardic communities in the United States today exhibit diverse Jewish religious practices. Many, particularly those originating from Muslim-majority countries, have a strong foundation in religious traditionalism, which Israeli researchers have termed *masortiyut*. As an approach towards Jewish practice and community rather than a formal denomination, *masortiyut* encompasses a wide spectrum of Jewish observance within communal norms and places a significant emphasis on Jewish traditions in the home, such as celebrating Shabbat together.

CUSTOMS, LITURGY AND LAW

Institutionally, Sephardic religious practice in the United States reflects shared characteristics across communities. For instance, rabbinical programs in the United States or Israel that ordain Sephardic rabbis follow Sephardic legal traditions. Similarly, Sephardic synagogues tend to share common features—most are not egalitarian, and the *hazzan* (prayer leader) typically leads from the center of the room rather than the front. While Sephardic Jews maintain distinct liturgical tradition shaped by traditions in their country or city of origin, there are notable commonalities. For example, Sephardic Jews customarily recite Selichot prayers throughout the entire month of Elul in preparation for the High Holidays and include the recitation of Shir Hashirim on Friday nights services. There are other broad similarities in Sephardic Jewish legal practice such as permitting the consumption of *kitniyot*, such as legumes, during Passover and performing Birkat Kohanim (the priestly blessing) daily during morning prayers.



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Today, scholars refer to *masortiyut* as a framework for understanding Israeli Jews (both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi) whose religious observance functions along a spectrum, rather than within the rigid religious-secular divide.

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Many contemporary Sephardic Jews in the US do not identify with denominations like Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox Judaism and instead understand their Judaism as a tradition and in non-denominational terms.

DENOMINATIONS & TRADITIONALISM

Historically, Sephardic Jews differ from Ashkenazi Jews in how they perceive their religious identity. Today in both Israel and the United States, there are fundamental differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews not only in law and custom but also in the very structure of religious observance.

In Israel, for example, scholars have pointed out that the religious-secular binary, which sociologists had assumed to be universal (i.e., the distinction between being “religious” or “secular”), does not apply to many Mizrahi Israelis. Mizrahi communities historically developed in societies where this binary did not emerge in the same way. Today, scholars refer to *masortiyut* as a framework for understanding Israeli Jews (both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi) whose religious observance functions along a spectrum, rather than within the rigid religious-secular divide.

This phenomenon has been less studied in the US, where Sephardic Judaism presents a complex and evolving landscape. Many contemporary Sephardic Jews in the US do not identify with denominations like

Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox Judaism and instead understand their Judaism as a tradition and in non-denominational terms.

At the same time, in an American context—where Sephardic communities exist as a minority within a broader Ashkenazi environment—many Sephardic individuals, institutions, and synagogues have aligned with denominational frameworks, particularly Ashkenazi Orthodoxy, including the influence of Haredi Orthodoxy. For some, this alignment serves as a way to signal that they are not affiliated with Conservative or Reform Judaism, making Orthodoxy the least inappropriate denominational category available. In other cases, it reflects shared values, such as gender separation in prayer and a more conservative approach to Jewish law.

In some communities, Orthodox influence has blurred distinctions between traditionalism and Orthodox practice due to continuous interaction and the adoption of customs. While many interviewees described their backgrounds as moderate and tolerant of diverse religious lifestyles, some viewed Orthodox influence as narrowing communal tolerance and diminishing the openness to religious diversity that characterizes *masortiyut*. Some saw this as a departure from how Sephardic Jews have historically lived. Others argued that *masortiyut* needed Orthodox institutions to have continuity in America.

There are notable exceptions to the broader trend of Ashkenazi Orthodox influence. Among Sephardic Jews in Ashkenazi-majority communities, religious diversity remains significant, with individuals participating across various denominations, including Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and others. At the community level, exceptions also exist. For example, the Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles demonstrates broad communal diversity, with large numbers of Persian Jews engaging with multiple denominations—from Reform to Conservative to Orthodox—while maintaining connections to both traditional and Orthodox institutions.

Race and Ethnicity in the United States

The growing interest in Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States has emerged alongside the broader national reckoning with racial and ethnic diversity, marginalization, and underrepresentation. Race and racial categories, it bears emphasizing, are socially constructed frameworks used to organize human populations based on perceived physical differences. Ethnicity, by contrast, is typically defined by cultural heritage, traditions, and shared history, particularly among immigrant communities, and the integration of the communities into American society.

The place of Jews within America's racial and ethnic frameworks remains ambiguous in several key ways. First, the perceived social, political, and economic

success of Jews, along with their integration into mainstream society, often associates the majority of Jews of European descent with whiteness. Yet, for many Jews, a shared sense of peoplehood, culture, and history reinforces their identity as a distinct group, separate from the broader concept of "white America." Rising antisemitism, particularly from white supremacists, has further complicated this association, leading many to question whether Jews can—or should—be seen as unproblematically white.

Second, Jews have always been a multi-ethnic and multi-racial people as those terms are understood today. Thousands of years of diasporic living across different regions of the world produced distinct Jewish



cultural identities, languages, traditions, and physical appearances. Cases of intermarriage, adoption, and conversion further expanded the diversity in categories of Jewish ethnic and racial identification.

Third, ambiguity persists because mainstream American society—and historically, the US government—primarily categorizes Jews as a religious group rather than a racial or ethnic one. Jews are not formally recognized as a racial or ethnic group in the US Census or most other official efforts to measure diversity and equity.

SEPHARDIC JEWS IN THE US RACIAL AND ETHNIC FRAMEWORK

If the position of Jews generally within America's racial and ethnic categorization is complex, that of Sephardic Jews is even more so. Historically, Ashkenazi Jews at times racialized their Sephardic co-religionists as they navigated their own racial identity in America. Today, increasing awareness of diversity has led some to frame Sephardic experiences within broader conversations about Jewish racial and ethnic diversity. It is important to approach these conversations with caution because generalizations about the relationship between Sephardic identity and US racial and ethnic categories risk oversimplifying a nuanced reality. In that spirit, we highlight several high-level themes about the contemporary intersection of Sephardic and US racial and ethnic identities. These themes may seem to contradict each other, but this only points to the complex nature of how these identities intersect with each other.

To begin, it is important not to assume that the experiences of Jews who identify as Sephardic and Jews who identify with US racial and ethnic categories—such as black, Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern—are parallel. There are structural similarities in these cases in the sense of exclusion from or unequal representation in majority group spaces, but the minority status of Sephardic Jews within majority-Ashkenazi spaces is distinct from the minority status of Jews with racial and ethnic identities within majority white Jewish spaces. Conflating them risks oversimplifying the nuanced ways in which identity, history, social positioning, and contemporary perspectives may differ among and between them.

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The religious-secular binary... does not apply to many Mizrahi Israelis.

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews take varied position when it comes to US racial and ethnic categories. When asked, some Sephardic Jews identify as white while others identify as Asian, black, Hispanic and Middle Eastern, indicating that these identities—despite being *distinct* from each other—sometimes *overlap* with each other. Still other Sephardic Jews reject US racial and ethnic categories altogether because they do not reflect their experiences in their countries of origin and do not represent their own self-understanding.¹¹

It follows that the intersection of Sephardic and Mizrahi identity and identity as JOC is complex and differentiated. Historically, Ashkenazi Jews at times racialized their Sephardic co-religionists as they navigated their own racial identity in America. Today, increasing awareness of diversity has led some to frame Sephardic experiences within broader conversations about Jewish racial and ethnic diversity.



In recent years, the term Jews of color (JOC) has gained prominence as a way to describe non-white Jews in America, even as the boundaries of this category remain contested. However, whether the term should apply to all non-white Jews remains an open question—one that has not been thoroughly studied and that our findings challenge. In popular discourse, Jews of color is often positioned in opposition to Ashkenazi, implying that Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews automatically fall under the JOC umbrella and that white and Ashkenazi are synonymous. As a result, JOC are sometimes grouped alongside Sephardim and Mizrahi Jews or (mistakenly) equated with them, while white-presenting Jews are incorrectly assumed to be Ashkenazi.

An overwhelming majority of our respondents—including Syrian, Bukharian, Hispanic, Moroccan, Persian, and Jews of other MENA descent—do not identify with the category of JOC, a finding that aligns with the survey data presented in the next report. At

the same time, some Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews—a minority, to be sure—do in fact identify as JOC and/or have built alliances with organizations representing JOC, citing shared experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and underrepresentation within the broader Jewish landscape.

Today, the most common points of intersection between Sephardic Jews and US minority ethnic and racial categories are Hispanic and Middle Eastern/North African. This intersection is complicated by upcoming changes in US Census classification. Until recently, Hispanic ethnicity was treated separately from race—e.g., white, black, Asian—on government forms, and there was no official MENA category, despite its increasing recognition as a racial/ethnic category in America. The US government’s 2024 decision to consolidate race and ethnicity into a single framework and introduce a MENA option will give Sephardic (and other) Jews the ability to choose Hispanic and/or MENA instead of, or in addition to, white. However, it remains unclear how many will do so. While many Sephardic Jews continue to identify strongly with their origins in the Middle East, North Africa, or Latin America, they often distinguish themselves from non-Jewish immigrants from those regions with whom they sometimes have uneasy relationships, and they may reject the categories that align with those regions.

Lastly, as noted earlier in this section, it is important to remember that Sephardic identity has its origins in ancestry and religion, not race. Reflecting one of two major Jewish religious traditions that has existed for over a millennium across different regions, empires, and countries, Sephardic identity fosters unique forms of belonging and exclusion that do not fit neatly into US racial and ethnic frameworks. There is some overlap, but that is an empirical issue that requires investigation. Assuming a *priori* that there is complete alignment between Sephardic Jews and Jews who share US racial and ethnic identities is a disservice to both, for it denies their distinctive histories and experiences, as well as their distinctive contemporary perspectives, challenges, and needs.



The Population Size and Characteristics of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States

POPULATION ESTIMATE: 10% OF US JEWS ARE SEPHARDIC AND/OR MIZRAHI

Based on an analysis conducted by the Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS) estimates of the Sephardic and/or Mizrahi adult Jewish population in the United States range from 7% to 11% of all US adult Jews. The low-end estimate (7%), derived from the Pew Research Center's Jewish Americans in 2020 study, translates to approximately 375,800 Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish adults. The high end estimate (11%), based on a recalculation of national data using local studies, yields a significantly higher estimate of 612,900 adults.

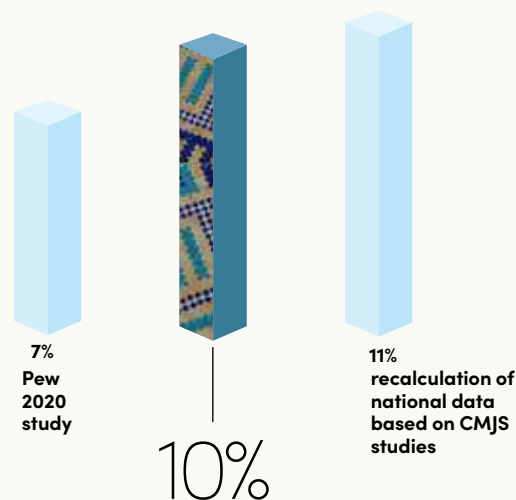
Given the variations across surveys, this report adopts a working estimate of 10% for the Sephardic and Mizrahi adult Jewish population in the United States. This decision is based on two key factors:

- **Undercounting of Immigrant Populations:** Survey research suggests that immigrant communities tend to be underrepresented due to lower response rates.
- **Question Wording Differences:** The Pew survey's phrasing may have depressed responses, particularly among those whose lineage traces to North Africa or the Middle East but not directly to Spain. In contrast, local studies have framed the question in ways that better align with how respondents understand and identify their heritage, resulting in higher estimates of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews.

The following section details methodology, data sources, and adjustments made to arrive at these estimates.

POPULATION ESTIMATES VARY BY DATA SOURCE

Estimates of the Sephardic/Mizrahi Adult Jewish population in the US range from 7 to 11% of all US adult Jews



This working estimate is based on two factors:

- 1 Undercounting of immigrant populations due to lower response rates
- 2 Pew survey's phrasing may have depressed responses

DATA SOURCES

Because the US government does not collect information on religious groups and because it does not count Jews among its official racial and ethnic groups, estimates of the size and characteristics of the Jewish population are dependent on non-governmental surveys. While surveys of the US Jewish population go back many decades, it is only in relatively recent years that a number of surveys of Jewish populations have asked about Sephardic and Mizrahi heritage.

In an analysis specifically conducted for this study, the Brandeis University's Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies (CMJS) utilized a set of surveys to generate a range of estimates about the size of the adult Sephardic and Mizrahi populations in the US and provide selected socio-demographic and Jewish characteristics about them. The findings presented in this section are based on the CMJS's analysis.

The surveys CMJS used are the Pew Research Center's 2020 national survey of US Jews, eight local Jewish community studies—in New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Greater MetroWest (NJ), Kansas City, Long Beach (CA), Louisville, and Delaware—and surveys of Birthright Israel applicants. All eight local Jewish community studies were sponsored by Jewish Federations in those locations. The UJA- Federation of New York's 2023 Jewish Community Study of New York was conducted by SSRS, while the other seven were conducted by the CMJS. The Birthright surveys were also conducted by CMJS.¹²

All of the questions about Sephardic and Mizrahi heritage on these surveys were posed in “select all that apply” formats. That is, respondents could pick all the response options that applied to them. However, the question wording and response options on the Pew survey differ from the question wording and response options used on the seven local community studies conducted by CMJS, and both of those questions and their corresponding response options differ from the question wording and response options on the New York survey. These variations in question wording and response options created challenges in comparing and synthesizing results across them.¹³

Beyond issues of question wording and response options, the extant surveys have other methodological differences—including sampling designs, question order, and weighting to account for biases and errors in data collection—that may affect comparability. Furthermore, while the Pew study was national in scope, the other studies are local, and their results may differ from local communities that have not been surveyed. The methodological differences across the existing studies, and the limited number of local studies with available data, highlight the need for more survey research on Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the US in general and more standardized research in particular. Section 5 on recommendations for researchers addresses this issue more directly.

DATA SOURCES FOR SEPHARDIC & MIZRAHI JEWISH POPULATION ESTIMATES

How existing surveys contribute to understanding community demographics



DATA ANALYSIS

The CMJS analysis provides estimates of Sephardic and Mizrahi adult Jews that range from 7–11% of all US adult Jews.

The low-end of this range, 7%, comes from survey data from Pew’s Jewish Americans in 2020 study and translates to 375,800 Jewish adults. The Pew study asked about Jewish heritage this way:

In terms of Jewish heritage, do you think of yourself as...
(Check all that apply)

- Ashkenazi (following Jewish customs of Central and Eastern Europe)
- Sephardic (following Jewish customs of Spain)
- Mizrahi (following Jewish customs of North Africa and the Middle East)
- Other
- Not sure
- This does not apply to me / I am just Jewish

The high end of the range, 11%, comes from seven combined CMJS studies—which, it is important to remember—are not a representative sample of all US Jews.



The seven local community surveys that CMJS conducted asked the question this way:

Regarding your [their] Jewish heritage, do you [does your spouse/partner] consider yourself [himself/herself/themselves] to be Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi, or something else? (Select all that apply)

- Ashkenazi
- Sephardic
- Mizrahi
- Other (please specify)
- None of these, no particular Jewish heritage
- Don’t know

The differences between the Pew and CMJS questions may have led to a lower estimate of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the Pew data for two reasons. First, the Pew version’s emphasis on *following the customs* of a particular Jewish heritage, rather than on *considering* oneself to be of a particular Jewish heritage, may have depressed any heritage selection from less engaged Jews. The survey data support this hypothesis: there is a larger share of “Not sure” and “This does not apply to me” responses to the Pew question (24%) than there are “None of these” and “Don’t know” responses in the CMJS surveys (16%). In other words, a larger share of respondents in Pew than in the CMJS did not select any Jewish heritage. Second, Pew’s specification of Sephardic heritage as following the customs of *Spain* in particular may have diminished responses for self-identified Sephardic Jews who trace their geographic lineage to areas outside Spain, such as Jewish communities in North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, and other parts of the Middle East. Again, the survey data support this hypothesis: the Pew survey estimates 6% of Jewish adults are Sephardic, while the CMJS surveys estimate 9%.

The New York study asked the question in yet a third way, combining Sephardic and Mizrahi in one response option:

In terms of Jewish heritage, do you think of yourself as:

- Ashkenazi
- Sephardic or Mizrahi
- Other
- Not sure

The survey results yielded a 10% share of Jewish adults *thinking of themselves as Sephardic or Mizrahi*, closer to the combined CMJS estimate of 11% than the Pew estimate of 7%. Because of the way the response option was constructed in the New York study, it is not possible to generate separate estimates for Sephardic Jews and Mizrahi Jews.

Adjusting the Pew estimates

To account for what may have been an underestimate of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the Pew survey, CMJS calculated four new estimates, two based on adjusting the Pew data by the seven CMJS studies and two based on adjust the Pew data by the seven CMJS studies plus the New York study.

Adjustments based on CMJS studies

Table 3.1 shows the two adjustments to the Pew estimates based on the seven combined CMJS studies. The first new estimate adjusted the share of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews among Pew survey respondents located in the same seven communities as the CMJS local studies to 11%, leaving the share across all other Pew respondents at 7%, and recalculated the national

total and proportion. The result is a small incremental increase of less than 1,000 adults (from 375,800 to 376,500), with the proportion remaining at 7% when rounded. The second new estimate assumed the CMJS share of 11% Sephardic or Mizrahi is representative of the entire country, raised the Pew share to 11% across all respondents, and recalculated the combined Sephardic/Mizrahi population estimate, which in this case increases by more than 237,100 adults to 612,900.

Adjustments based on CMJS studies plus New York study

The Cohen Center produced two additional national estimates based on data from both the seven CMJS local studies and the New York study (Table 3.2). The first new estimate adjusted the share of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews among Pew survey respondents located in the seven CMJS local community studies to 11%, the Pew survey respondents in New York to 10%, left the share across all other Pew respondents at 7%, and recalculated the national total and proportion. This resulted in an increase of 58,700 adults, from 375,800 to 434,500 (8% nationally). The second new estimate calculated the proportion of Sephardic and Mizrahi

Table 3.1 Pew Baseline and CMJS-Adjusted Estimates of Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews

	Pew Baseline		Pew Adjusted: Respondents in CMJS Communities Only		Pew Adjusted: All Respondents Assuming CMJS Percentage	
	Estimate	%	Estimate	%	Estimate	%
Ashkenazi, any	4,076,400	71	4,094,700	71	4,382,900	76
Sephardic, any	329,600	6	335,300	6	508,800	9
Mizrahi, any	104,100	2	91,400	2	138,800	2
Sephardic/Mizrahi, any	375,800	7	376,500	7	612,900	11
Other	28,900	<1	20,400	<1	11,600	<1
Don't know	470,500	7	452,800	8	445,200	8
None / Doesn't apply	983,000	17	959,000	17	474,100	8

Note: percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Jews in the eight local studies combined (10%) and applied it to all of the Pew respondents. This resulted in a national estimate of 591,100 Sephardic and Mizrahi adults, an increase of 215,300 over Pew’s initial estimate of 375,800.

To summarize, then, the various upward adjustments to the Pew estimate account for the different and arguably more accurate ways the local surveys asked about Sephardic and Mizrahi identity and produce both higher percentages and, correspondently, bigger estimates of the adult population. The low-end of the range, based on Pew’s data alone, is 375,800 Sephardic and Mizrahi

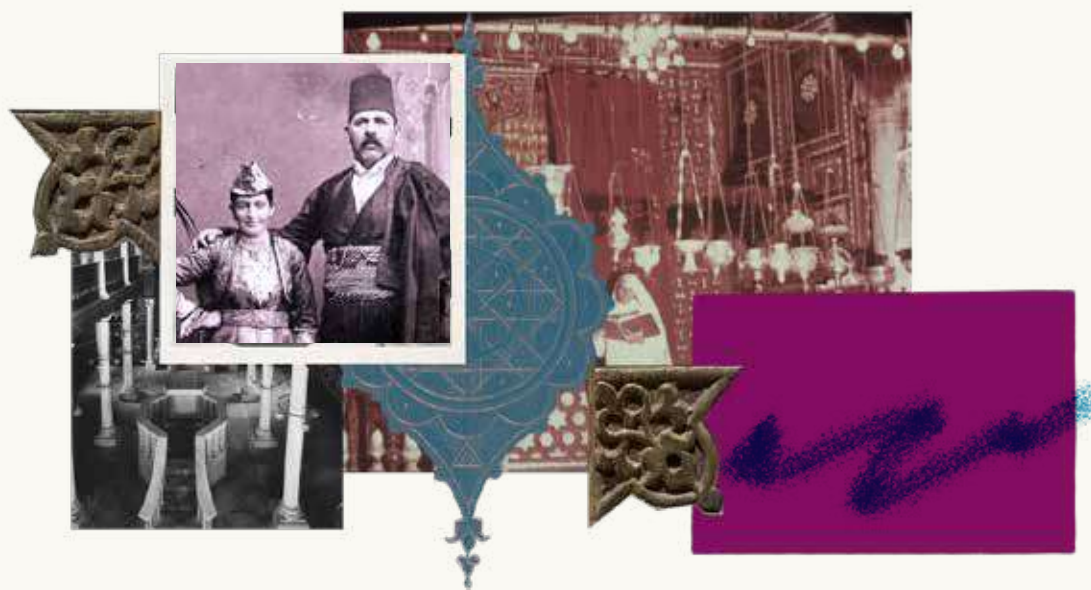
adults. The high end of the range (11%) is 612,900. In between are three other estimates: 376,500 (also 7%), 434,500 (8%), and 591,100 (10%).¹⁴

From within this range, and for the purposes of this report, we have chosen to adopt an estimate of 10% for the Sephardic and Mizrahi population. We base this decision on two factors. First, survey research experience suggests that immigrant populations tend to be undercounted, typically due to lower response rates. Second, question wording on the Pew survey may have resulted in fewer affirmative answers in general, and fewer Sephardic answers specifically.

Table 3.2 Pew Baseline and CMJS/NYC-Adjusted Estimates of Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews

	Pew Baseline		Pew Adjusted: Respondents in CMJS and NYC Communities Only		Pew Adjusted: All Respondents Assuming CMJS/ NYC Combined Percentage	
	Estimate	%	Estimate	%	Estimate	%
Ashkenazi, any	4,076,400	71	4,161,963	72	4,386,493	76
Sephardic/ Mizrahi, any	375,800	7	434,459	8	591,087	10

Note: percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.



SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Further analysis of data from the seven combined CMJS local community surveys—in Chicago, Los Angeles, Greater MetroWest (NJ), Kansas City, Long Beach (CA), Louisville, and Delaware—and the New York survey data suggest broad socio-demographic patterns that distinguish Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews from each other and from Ashkenazi Jews (Table 3.3). It is important to remember that the CMJS surveys provided separate response options for Sephardic, Mizrahi, and Ashkenazi, while the New York study used a combined Sephardic/Mizrahi response option. Neither study provided definitions of the terms Sephardic, Mizrahi or Ashkenazi and both referred to Jewish heritage. Lastly, it may be that the terms mean different things and/or are more salient

in some communities than others. In the CMJS surveys, Mizrahi Jews are the most likely to identify as any non-white race and as Persons of Color compared to Sephardic Jews and Ashkenazi Jews. It should be noted that even among Mizrahi Jews, just 17% identify as a person of color (POC), consistent with our community portrait data showing strong majorities of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews do not embrace a racialized identity, including being categorized as JOC. Sephardic Jews are more likely to identify as Hispanic than either Mizrahi Jews or Ashkenazi Jews while Mizrahi Jews are the most likely to identify as MENA, followed by Sephardic and then Ashkenazi Jews.¹⁵

The relationship between Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews and racial/ethnic self-identification in the US

Table 3.3. Selected Social and Demographic Characteristics, in Eight American cities

	CMJS Studies Only			New York	CMJS and New York Studies Combined
	Ashkenazi, any (%)	Sephardic, any (%)	Mizrahi, any (%)	Sephardic/ Mizrahi, any (%)	Sephardic/ Mizrahi, any (%)
Any non-White race	7	25	58	8	19
Persons of Color	2	12	17	6	10
Hispanic	3	14	7	17	16
Other race write-in: Middle Eastern/North African country	1	14	34	Category not used in New York study	Category not used in New York study
Median Age	56	51	38	46	48
Born/Raised outside the US	14	31	31	37	34
Politically Moderate/Conservative	37	59	59	57	62
Economically vulnerable	18	25	30	30	27
Graduate degree	50	39	31	30	34

Note: percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

is complex, and different data sources tell different stories. For example, in New York, a higher percentage of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews identify as white compared to findings from CMJS studies. Meanwhile, Pew lacks a sufficiently large sample of Sephardic or Mizrahi Jews who identify as black non-Hispanic, Hispanic, Asian, multiracial, or another non-white category—either separately or even when aggregated into a broader “non-white” category—to analyze these groups meaningfully. Given these limitations, we caution against overgeneralizations. While we can confidently say that Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews should not be assumed to be white, we also have data showing that they do not broadly self-identify within racialized categories such as or JOC.

Other selected demographic characteristics in the CMJS survey data also differ across the groups. Sephardic Jews tend to be a little younger than Ashkenazi Jews while Mizrahi Jews tend to be quite a lot younger than Ashkenazi Jews. Both Sephardic Jews and Mizrahi Jews are more likely than Ashkenazi Jews to be born and/or raised outside the United States, to be politically moderate or conservative, and to be economically vulnerable.¹⁶ Ashkenazi Jews are the most likely of the three groups to have a graduate degree, followed by Sephardic Jews and Mizrahi Jews, which likely reflects, at least in part, the younger ages of Mizrahim.

In New York, the combined group Sephardic/Mizrahi is substantially less likely to identify as any non-white race or as Persons of Color. In other respects, though, Sephardic/Mizrahi Jews in New York do not appear to differ dramatically from their counterparts in the CMJS studies.

“

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews should not be assumed to be white—but most also do not identify with racialized categories like POC or JOC.

NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- ➔ Among younger Jews (under 32), 16% identify as Sephardic or Mizrahi (Birthright survey)
- ➔ That’s higher than what national estimates suggest for the adult Jewish population in the US
- ➔ The data suggest that younger Jews are more likely to identify as Sephardic or Mizrahi than older Jews.

Birthright Israel survey data from summer 2020, 2021, and 2022 applicants, all of whom are younger than age 32, provide further evidence that younger Jews are more likely to identify as Sephardic or Mizrahi than older Jews. More specifically, a higher share of the surveyed Birthright participants (16%) identify as Sephardic or Mizrahi than Pew (7%) or local study respondents (10%) who are comprised of respondents of all adult ages.



JEWISH CHARACTERISTICS

The seven CMJS studies also allow for a comparison of Jewish behaviors and attitudes across Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Mizrahi respondents (Table 3.4). Across the three groups, Mizrahi Jews have the highest rates of communal participation, the highest likelihood of being Israel and strongest connections to Israel, the highest share of respondents who say being Jewish is somewhat or very much a part of their daily life,¹⁷ and the lowest intermarriage rates.¹⁸ In contrast, Ashkenazi Jews have the lowest rates of communal participation,

the weakest connections to Israel, the smallest share of those who say being Jewish is somewhat or very much a part of their daily life, and the highest intermarriage rates. On all of the measures, Sephardic Jews score between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews. Data on the combined Sephardic/Mizrahi group in New York shows they may be somewhat more religiously observant, more likely to travel to Israel, and less likely to be intermarried than Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the CMJS studies.

Table 3.4 Selected Jewish Behaviors and Attitudes, CMJS and New York Studies

	CMJS Studies Combined			New York	CMJS and New York
	Ashkenazi, any (%)	Sephardic, any (%)	Mizrahi, any (%)	Sephardic/ Mizrahi, any (%)	Sephardic/ Mizrahi, any (%)
Fast on Yom Kippur	48	65	80	86	77
Attend High Holiday services	45	51	60	-	-
Belong to synagogue/ congregation	27	35	41	47	44
Volunteered for Jewish organization	26	31	38	-	-
Donate to Jewish organization	52	66	69	-	-
Being Jewish is somewhat or very much a part of daily life	60	68	88	-	-
Travel to Israel at least once (among those who have NOT lived in Israel)	60	62	82	80	65
Lived in Israel	10	16	28	14	16
Israeli citizen	5	15	31	-	-
Emotionally connected to Israel—somewhat or very much	69	79	80	76	77
Married to non-Jewish spouse (among those married)	36	34	23	19	25

Note: percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Community Portraits

INTRODUCTION

The following four community portraits are a central component of this study. They tell the story of four different groups of Sephardic Jews who migrated to the US either fully or in part after reforms to US immigration law in 1965 opened the door to more immigrants from regions including Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. We focused on the Syrian community in Brooklyn, New York, the Persian community in Los Angeles, the Bukharian community in Queens, New York, and the Latin Sephardic population hub in South Florida. All four communities trace their original geographic lineages to Muslim-majority countries and regions, though for Latin Sephardic Jews, their most recent countries of residence in Latin America are majority Christian.

As qualitative studies of geographically-concentrated communities, based on in-depth interviews and observations, these portraits provide deep insights into how the communities “operate”—the social networks and

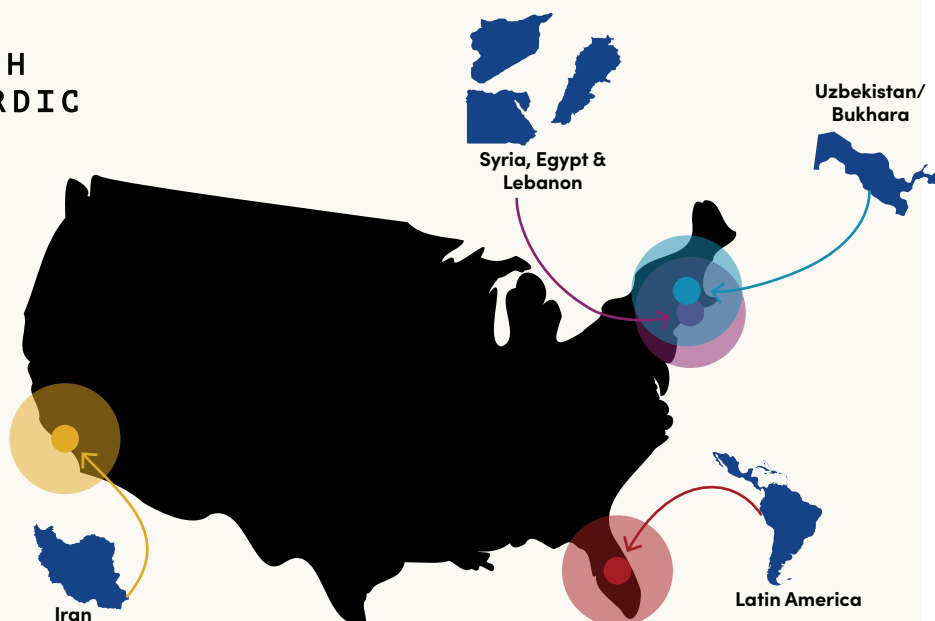
institutions that support them, the moral frameworks that regulate them, and the relationships they have with Ashkenazi Jews in particular and American society more generally. This brief introduction to the communities serves to delineate selective commonalities they share and differences that distinguish them from each other.

At the same time, qualitative studies are not—and do not claim to be—representative of all people who have a particular identity or consider themselves part of a group. When our portraits describe a particular community, it is a representation of how our interviewees described them to us. The strength of individual identification with social groups and communities varies. Those who live on the geographic peripheries of communities, or who have moved away altogether from them, or whose cultural, social or political commitments lie elsewhere, are likely to be quite different than those who live “in the neighborhood” and whose behaviors and attitudes are reinforced on a daily basis through

FROM BROOKLYN TO SOUTH FLORIDA: WHERE SEPHARDIC COMMUNITIES FLOURISH

- Brooklyn: Syrian Jewish community
- Queens: Bukharian Jewish community
- L.A.: Persian Jewish community
- South Florida: Latin Sephardic Jewish Community*

*For many Latin Sephardic Jews, the US is not the first stop, but one of several in a longer migration journey that began when their families left the MENA region or other countries of origin



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We are describing the lives of those deeply embedded in Sephardic networks, not making claims about authenticity.

interactions with other community members. For example, marriage to non-Jews in each of these portrayed communities is strongly rejected, but a quarter to a third of married Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the CMJS surveys (see Section 3) have a non-Jewish spouse.

The community portraits—and the themes of commonalities and differences drawn in this introduction—describe the lives of those deeply embedded in Sephardic networks, institutions, and geographic locales, much more so than those who identify as Sephardic but have tenuous social and geographic ties to the groups. By choosing to focus on communities, we are not making a statement about the authenticity of one group over another or about groups over individuals. We hope future studies will look at more forms of Sephardic life in the US.

While some survey data on these populations is now available, we chose to create portraits based primarily on interviews and qualitative data.¹⁹ This decision was influenced by several factors, including timing—when the portraits were assigned and written, some data was not yet available, though we have since integrated it into our quantitative section—and the uneven distribution of data across different communities.

More fundamentally, this was a deliberate methodological choice, drawing on grounded theory and the understanding that for understudied populations whose categories of analysis have not yet been fully explored and whose members are less likely to answer surveys, qualitative research provides a crucial foundation. While quantitative surveys capture broad trends, they often fail to reach certain segments of these communities or may reflect the perspectives of those most likely to engage with surveys rather than the community as a whole.

Additionally, for some populations, discrepancies between survey results and lived realities suggest that integrating quantitative and qualitative data requires

careful analysis. In such cases, mixed methods research is not just a matter of using different kinds of data, but requires a thoughtful process of reconciliation, examining where different methods align, where they diverge, and why certain groups may be over- or underrepresented in particular data sources.

We hope that future studies will build on this work by employing a mixed methods approach that carefully integrates both qualitative and quantitative research to provide a more holistic and accurate picture of these populations.

COMMONALITIES ACROSS COMMUNITIES

The family as an institution is core to all the communities. The family unit—both nuclear and intergenerational extended family—is in many ways sacrosanct; it is where Judaism is learned, manifested, enacted, and transmitted. Deep and abiding family relationships, family responsibilities, expectations of remaining in close proximity to family members (with the exception in this study of Sephardic Latin Jews), and consistent and regular family gatherings for Shabbat, holidays, and other celebrations, all mark the central role of family in these Sephardic communities.

METHODOLOGY & SCOPE



The four community portraits focus on Syrian Jews in Brooklyn, Persian Jews in Los Angeles, Bukharian Jews in Queens, and Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida



The interview subjects in these studies are overwhelmingly individuals who identify as embedded in their community networks—not those who are loosely affiliated or geographically distant



These portraits are based on qualitative research—in-depth interviews and observations—not representative surveys

Sephardic religious practice in the four communities reflects a strong sense of traditionalism, an approach that combines reverence for religious laws, customs, legitimations, and authorities, especially in the communities' public spaces, with flexibility in personal and family religious observance. Certain practices, such as sharing Shabbat dinner with family, observing major holidays, and maintaining communal traditions, are widely upheld among traditional Jews in these communities. Traditionalism reflects how these communities' historical processes and encounters with modernity did not include denominational divisions—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist—that characterize much of Ashkenazi US Jewry. At the same time, there has been a gradual shift toward the religious right among Syrian, Bukharian, and Latin Sephardic Jews, marked by an increased emphasis on personal and public religious observance. This shift has been catalyzed by alignments and interactions with, and in some cases the adoption of, Orthodox or Haredi Judaism. Of the four communities studied in this report, only the Persian community in Los Angeles has experienced a more diverse communal trend, with some parts of the community moving towards Orthodoxy and other parts participating in Reform and Conservative Jewish institutions.

The communities are engaged in a constant negotiation of change and continuity. Community members desire to make new lives for themselves and to succeed in America. At the same time, they have an abiding connection to cultures in their countries of origin, though typically not to the current regimes in those places or to non-Jewish immigrants from the same countries. Another key dimension of change is across generations, with some younger community members slowly adopting new perspectives on education, occupation, gender, and family. At the same time, there is a strong preference for traditional ethnic connections—marriage with other community members being perhaps the best example—and cultural practices and norms, even among younger community members.

Most community members exhibit a notable resistance to language that frames race as their primary identity, categorizes them as JOC, or positions them as a minority group in need of DEI initiatives.

Lastly, community members are in general socially and politically conservative. This applies to US domestic issues, their strongly-held connections to Israel and Zionism, and their vigorous sense of belonging to the Jewish people.



RESPONSES TO SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Syrian Jews have built robust institutions and organizations that form the backbone of their tight-knit community

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Of the four communities studied in this report, only the Persian community in Los Angeles has experienced a more diverse communal trend, with some parts of the community moving towards Orthodoxy and other parts participating in Reform and Conservative Jewish institutions.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COMMUNITIES

While the four communities share many commonalities, they also differ in key ways. The factors that brought them to the United States vary. Early Syrian Jews migrated primarily in search of better economic opportunities, while later Syrian Jews and most Persian Jews fled anti-Jewish regimes. For Syrian Jews, this was driven by the Syrian regime’s long-standing anti-Jewish policies, including severe restrictions on emigration, what community informants describe as being kept in Syria as “virtual prisoners.” For Persian Jews, it was a sudden and cataclysmic upheaval triggered by the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Bukharians emigrated from Central Asia as the Soviet Union collapsed and emerging Muslim-majority states created unpredictable situations for Jews. Latin Sephardic Jews left to escape social upheavals and severe economic disruptions where they were living.

Relationships with the majority-Ashkenazi population and institutions differ. The Syrian Jewish community has created a set of strong community institutions that allow it to remain highly independent of Ashkenazi communities and institutions. The Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles has some independent institutions and is also highly integrated in Ashkenazi-led institutions. Bukharian Jews also combine some independent institutions while having integrated into Ashkenazi Orthodox frameworks to varying degrees. In South Florida, Latin Sephardic Jews are less of a cohesive community with a network of institutions and more of a population hub centered primarily around synagogues. All four communities

navigate interactions with Ashkenazi institutions in various ways but often encounter cultural friction and a lack of recognition for their distinct traditions.

The communities and their institutions vary in how they address the social challenges that accompany migration and have emerged over time in America. These challenges include caring for elders, supporting those in need, and addressing mental health and addiction. Coming from cultures where such issues were often not spoken about outside the home, these topics can carry stigma, creating unique hurdles that require culturally sensitive approaches. The Syrian community, with its long-established institutions, is better equipped to respond to social needs, including mental health and addiction, in a way that reflects its culture and sensitivities. By contrast, such services among Persian, Bukharian, and Latin Sephardic Jews remain less developed, and issues like addiction and mental health are not easily or openly discussed due to significant stigma.

Lastly, the Persian and Latin Sephardic communities stand out in ways particular to each of them. Though generally socially and politically conservative, the Persian community has a small but significant liberal/progressive segment, particularly among younger community members. The Persian community also stands out for its stronger prevalence of self-described secularism (shaped in fact by the secularism in pre-revolution Iran) and for having a significant segment that has found its institutional home in non-Orthodox denominations, such as Conservative institutions. The Latin Sephardic Jews in this study, in turn, are less of a geographically-concentrated ethnic enclave than the other Sephardic communities, and more of a hub of various smaller groups, families, and individuals who reside across a more geographically dispersed area.

PATHS TO THE US: MIGRATION DRIVERS BY COMMUNITY



What drove four Jewish communities to immigrate to the US?

Syrian Jews (Brooklyn)

Early migration in search of better economic opportunities, while later wave left to flee anti-Jewish regime

Latin Sephardic Jews (S. Florida)

Left to escape social upheavals and severe economic disruptions

Bukharian Jews (Queens)

Soviet Union collapse; Emerging Muslim-majority states created unpredictable situations for Jews.

Persian Jews (L.A.)

Upheaval triggered by the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran

ADDITIONAL NOTES

A Note on Estimating Community Size

Estimating the size of communities like those featured in this study is challenging. Survey research in immigrant communities, among people whose first language is not English, and among ethnic minorities often leads to population undercounts.

In contrast, estimates from community leaders—who are deeply embedded in community networks—are likely to overcount the true population size. These leaders often base their estimates on factors such as the number of seats sold for High Holiday services or the enrollment of children in educational programs, using these and other indicators to make rough calculations. As a result, community-generated estimates typically yield higher figures than those derived from survey research.

Where possible, we compare community size estimates from external survey data with those provided by community leadership. The true number likely falls somewhere in between, but pinpointing it remains a challenge.

A Note on Names & Portrait Consistency

All names in the portraits are pseudonyms and identifying details have been altered when needed to protect identities. For more information on the community portrait methodology, see the methodological appendix.

This report includes four community portraits, each developed using the same interview protocol to ensure consistency in data collection. However, the focus and presentation of each portrait vary based on the unique themes, priorities, and dynamics that emerged in interviews, resulting in differences in tone and emphasis across the portraits.



Syrian Jewish Community Portrait (Brooklyn)

SECTION 1.

Background

IMMIGRATION

Contemporary Syrian Jews trace Jewish presence in Syria back to biblical times, a claim that reflects their deep pride in their identity and their view of Syria as a sacred center of Jewish life. The exact origins of Jewish settlement in the region remain unclear, though it likely began in the post-biblical Hellenistic and Roman periods. From the Roman period onward, Jewish presence in Syria is well attested. Waves of migration—and out-migration—over centuries shaped the Jewish population, with different groups joining and leaving at various times.

By the 19th century, before large-scale migration out of the region reshaped their communities, Syrian Jews were primarily concentrated in Aleppo and Damascus, with smaller populations in towns like Qamishli. This population encompassed three distinct groups that had gradually merged into a cohesive whole:

the *Musta'arabim*, local Jews with ancient roots; Jews fleeing the expulsion and later the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal; and European Jews, such as the *Francos*, Italian Jews who arrived for business purposes.

Under Ottoman rule, Jews in Syria lived as *dhimmi*s (second-class citizens), maintaining a legally mandated lower social status but generally experiencing tolerance. However, this tolerance was contingent on the whims of the ruling authorities, and events like the infamous 1840 Damascus Blood Libel underscored the precariousness of their position. The libel—when Jewish leaders were falsely accused of murdering a Christian monk and his Muslim servant for ritual purposes, imprisoned, and brutally tortured, as the accusations fueled anti-Jewish violence and at least one leader died from torture—demonstrated the fragility of Jewish security.

Syrian society was structured around religious communities, including Jews, Christians, and the Muslim

HISTORICAL HIGHLIGHTS

Syrian Jews believe that Jews arrived in what is now Syria during Biblical times. Historical evidence confirms a Jewish presence in the region from the **Roman period** onward



Pre-19th Century:

The Jewish population of Syria included diverse groups such as the *Musta'arabim* (Jews who had lived in the region for centuries), Sephardic exiles, and the *Francos* (Western Jews of European origin)



By the 19th century Syrian Jews were primarily concentrated in **Aleppo** and **Damascus**, with smaller populations in towns like **Qamishli**

Mid-19th Century:

As the Ottoman Empire began to decline, economic hardship led many Jews to begin emigrating from Syria—marking the start of a long process of Jewish migration out of the region.



Mid- to Late 20th Century:

Jews expelled from Egypt, and others fleeing anti-Jewish persecution and instability in Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria, found refuge in the growing Syrian Jewish community in New York.

majority, who largely lived separately—marrying within their own groups and maintaining distinct social spheres—yet Jews remained economically and culturally integrated into broader society.

In the mid to late-1800s, economic pressures throughout the Ottoman Empire and exposure to Western ideas—partly through international ties with other Jews and the educational efforts of the Alliance Israélite Universelle—accelerated the processes that would lead to Jewish migration out of Syria. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 further shifted trade patterns, weakening inland commercial hubs like Aleppo and contributing to economic shifts that encouraged migration. Young, entrepreneurial men led the way, seeking economic opportunity mainly in England, South America, and the United States.

In the second half of the 20th century, the Syrian Jewish community in New York became a refuge for Jews fleeing state-sponsored persecution and political instability across the Middle East, particularly after the establishment of the State of Israel. New waves of migration included Jews expelled from or fleeing Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, those escaping Lebanon's civil war in the 1970s and 1980s, and Jews who escaped Syria's restrictive regime during the same period. In the 1990s, thousands of more Jews were finally allowed to emigrate freely from Syria after the Assad regime, under mounting US diplomatic pressure, lifted decades of state-sanctioned discrimination, including severe restrictions on emigration.

The close migration ties among Jewish communities in the former Ottoman Empire meant that many families could trace their histories through multiple migrations. For example, some Iraqi Jews who resettled in Lebanon in the 1950s later joined the New York Syrian community in the 1980s. Many Egyptian and Lebanese Jews who became part of the Syrian community in New York had deep-rooted family or cultural connections to it, as their families had previously lived in Syria before settling in Egypt or Lebanon. Shaped and replenished by migration over more than a century, the Syrian Jewish community in New York has defied typical patterns of assimilation. Today, it is home to fifth- and sixth-generation descendants of those original immigrants in addition to home to first-generation Americans and their children and remains a vibrant and cohesive community.



PLACES OF SETTLEMENT

Memoirs written by Syrian Jews about their early experiences in the United States reveal a story of both isolation and community. *Aleppo Chronicles* (1988), a collection of transcribed interviews compiled by Joseph Sutton, captures how many early Syrian immigrants first settled in Manhattan's Lower East Side, where they felt different from—and were often treated differently (and pejoratively) by—the much larger population of Eastern European Ashkenazi Jews.

As more Syrian men began to join from abroad, a pattern emerged: Syrian Jews worked together (often as peddlers), lived near one another, prayed together in Aleppan and Damascene synagogues, and gathered to eat in Syrian Jewish restaurants, such as a restaurant affectionately known as Rosie's in Allen and Grand Streets the Lower East Side.

As soon as they could afford to, Syrian men brought over the rest of their families from Syria. Slowly, these individuals began cohering into a group of families and individuals—a Syrian Jewish community on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Over time, as the community grew, its members moved from neighborhood to neighborhood,

VACATION PATTERNS



Flatbush/
Midwood

A large portion of the Syrian Brooklyn community relocates there for the summer to Deal, NJ



DSN Community
Center in Deal, NJ

first from the Lower East Side to Williamsburg, then to Bensonhurst, and finally to Flatbush/Midwood in Brooklyn, where it is primarily located today. Additionally, Syrian-led synagogues can be found in Manhattan and neighboring towns such as Great Neck.²⁰

By the 1950s and 1960s, community members began vacationing in New Jersey—first in Bradley Beach, then in Deal. A large portion (perhaps the majority) of the Brooklyn community relocates there for the summer. Over time, a year-round satellite community also developed in Deal, which came to refer not just to the town itself but to the surrounding areas as well.

Over more than a century in the United States, the Syrian Jewish community has maintained strong ethnic elements—from food

and social life to often working together and establishing their own schools. This cohesive identity helps explain why it became such a particularly attractive for other MENA Jews seeking to immigrate to the United States. As Elias, a 66 year-old man who escaped Syria in 1981 and was later joined by his family in 1990 after the Assad regime allowed them to leave, described it: “It’s like they moved everybody from [Syria] as is and they planted here [in Brooklyn] the same food, the same social life.” Elias felt at home: “You feel you are still there... You feel like we’re still in Syria.”

The size of this community is difficult to determine. According to the UJA 2023 Community Study, an estimated 38,200 people—based on the upper range of their combined adult and child estimates—identify with Syrian, Egyptian, or Lebanese Jewish traditions or ancestry.²¹ However, school and community leaders—who are

closely embedded in the community and have offered access to enrollment data—estimate the population to be at least 50,000, based on the number of children enrolled in Sephardic day schools and supplementary programs.

LANGUAGES

People in the Syrian Jewish community primarily speak English. Those who immigrated more recently speak Arabic fluently, though its use is gradually declining as generations become further removed from immigration.”

Even late-generation descendants of immigrants in the Syrian Jewish community continues to use a rich mix of Arabic and Jewish slang words that remain popular. Additionally, the community maintains a deeply rooted tradition of Syrian Jewish liturgy, characterized by careful pronunciation in liturgical Hebrew, unique Shabbat songs, the use of *maqamat*—the Arabic system of musical modes for chanting prayers—and distinct Torah readings. Syrian men, in particular, take great pride in preserving these liturgical traditions and are known for maintaining the integrity of Syrian prayer spaces.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Most of the Syrian Jewish community is middle and upper middle class, though there are many who are working class, many who require financial assistance, and also a small but prominent group of community

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It’s like they moved everybody from [Syria] as is and they planted here [in Brooklyn] the same food, the same social life.”



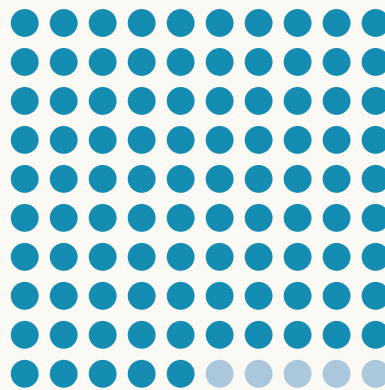
individuals who have accumulated significant wealth. Notably, the overwhelming majority of community members who experience upward economic mobility have not chosen to move away from the community; instead, they remain geographically rooted in the community's neighborhoods, reinforcing their strong ties. Often, they will strengthen their roots by purchasing homes for their children and grandchildren in the same neighborhood, thus generating a new form of upward mobility characterized not by moving to a better neighborhood but by reinvesting in the community's neighborhood.

Occupationally, Syrian men have concentrated in various industries over the decades. Historically, they have preferred to work in business, often for themselves. For many years, Syrian men played a significant role as middlemen, connecting factories in China and other Asian countries with large retail chains in the United States. In recent decades, members of the community can be found working in many different fields including in professional white-collar industries such as medicine and law.

Family businesses remain common, with relatives often hiring among themselves and working together, relying on the trust and loyalty that characterizes family ties. While an increasing number of community members

attend college, it is still common to meet individuals who have not. Education is viewed pragmatically—as a means to an end. If attending college helps build a business or make a good living, it is encouraged, but it is by no means considered an assumed expectation. Over time, an increasing number of Syrian women have entered the

JEWISH DAY SCHOOL PARTICIPATION RATES



95% of children from this Syrian community attend Orthodox Jewish day schools, according to community leaders' estimates

workforce. This shift is due in part to expanded notions of a woman's role but also to growing financial pressures on families, particularly the burden of day school tuition. While more women are working, it remains common for men to be the primary earners.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

The community is characterized by a traditionalism that blends deep respect for religion and religious authorities—especially in public spaces—with significant flexibility in private practice, particularly at home or outside the community. Many use the word “traditional” to describe their way of life. In the words of Elias, to be traditional means to have a certain moderation and push against religious extremes.

“Traditional means, like, you know, you keep all the tradition without [the] fanatics’ way. It’s kind of like you are religious and secular at the same time. With other communities, either you are religious or you’re not. We don’t do that... because we want to stay together in that kind of tradition, which is religious and secular combined.”

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Additionally, the community maintains a deeply rooted tradition of Syrian Jewish liturgy, characterized by careful pronunciation in liturgical Hebrew, unique Shabbat songs, the use of maqamat—the Arabic system of musical modes for chanting prayers—and distinct Torah readings.

Practically, this means that in this community Shabbat and major Jewish holidays are nearly universally observed, and virtually all families keep kosher at home, though specific practices vary between households as to the extent and nature of Shabbat and kosher observance. There is also broad commitment to sending children to Jewish day schools. Community leaders estimate that 95% of children from this Syrian community attend Orthodox Jewish day schools. As will be explained later, in this community there is a strong respect for tradition and alignment with Orthodoxy, which is the denomination that most closely reflects Syrian Jewish communal life and observance.

In the past few decades, the community has experienced rapid growth in Orthodox and especially Haredi influence. Internally, community members often use the term “black hat” to refer to Syrian Haredi Jews, a term that emerged in opposition to more traditional “white hats” seen as ideologically less traditional and more open to innovation. The growing Orthodox and specifically Haredi influence has led to increased religious observance overall, particularly due to the rising number and popularity of Haredi rabbis who serve both Haredi and non-Haredi Syrian Jews. But Haredi influence has also introduced tensions within the community, with concerns growing whether the community's broad spectrum of observance, while still maintaining cohesion, will endure amidst the growing Haredi black hat clout. This tension highlights the delicate balance between the community's traditional flexibility and the rising impact of stricter religious practices. Ezra, a 42-year-old born in the Mexican Aleppan Jewish community and raised in the United States, explained that as someone who is not Haredi, he feels looked down upon.

“Some are getting more religious, more towards the Haredi movement. And it’s causing a little bit of division. I hope that ends. I mean, everybody should be able to do what they believe without being looked down upon. But I don’t know. That’s what I feel like from the more religious side. They always look down at us.”

This dynamic highlights the tension between maintaining a flexible, traditional identity and the increasing influence of stricter religious observance in a growing and decentralized community. While the community retains many practices and institutions that tie diverse

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The Syrian Jewish community has long prioritized self-sufficiency, establishing and sustaining a vast network of communal institutions that serve its members across generations.

Syrian Jews to each other in multiple ways, these shifting dynamics challenge its long standing self-perception as a “united” community.

The community also broadly holds socially conservative positions on the role of women in religious life, with restrictions on their ability to hold religious leadership positions in the community similar to Haredi Jewish communities.

FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS

Syrian Jewish families typically have an average of four children, although Haredi Syrian Jewish families tend to have even more. It is common for individuals to live at home until marriage, and both men and women tend to marry young, often in their early 20s.

Family is the most important social unit in the community, with extended multi-generational families maintaining exceptionally close ties. This is reflected in the way families prioritize spending holidays and summers together. Living near parents and siblings is considered essential to Syrian Jewish life, and children often grow up with their cousins as their closest playmates. Extended families frequently vacation together, celebrate holidays together, and even go into business together. In the Syrian Jewish community, there is nothing more important than family.

COMMUNAL INSTITUTIONS

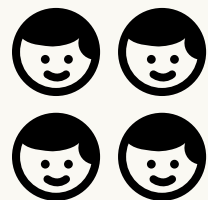
The Syrian Jewish community has long prioritized self-sufficiency, establishing and sustaining a vast network of communal institutions that serve its members across generations. These institutions, supported by a strong culture of charity, volunteerism, and lay leadership across gender, form the backbone of the community’s social, religious, and educational life.

From synagogues and schools to social welfare agencies and cultural centers, the breadth of institutions is extensive and deeply ingrained in communal life. Many of these institutions are driven by a strong volunteer culture, and an increasingly professionalized staff. The community’s volunteer and philanthropic culture has a unique flavor, including philanthropy driven through informal networks as opposed to the philanthropic foundations that are common in other Jewish communities.

One defining objective of the community’s institutions is their ability to create continuity across generations. The establishment of community-run day schools and summer camps in the mid-20th century—particularly in Brooklyn and later in Deal—ensured that education remained aligned with the values and traditions practiced at home. This emphasis on independent institutions allowed the Syrian Jewish community to maintain a distinct identity, separate from both broader American Jewish life and other Sephardic groups in the US.

Over time, the community has also developed specialized institutions to address evolving needs, such as social services for the elderly, vocational training programs, and advocacy organizations. These efforts have enabled Syrian Jews to maintain a tight-knit, well-organized communal structure that continues to thrive today.

AVERAGE FAMILY SIZE



Syrian Jewish families tend to have 4 or more children, according to community leaders’ estimates

Identities

SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI

Community members identify as Sephardic, name their institutions Sephardic, and take great pride in this identity. While an examination of community documents suggest that the term only began to be widely used as a social identifier in the 1960s, it has since become ingrained and largely unexamined. Community members do not typically interrogate the term's meaning, but when asked, some explain that it is used because they follow Sephardic law or because Sephardic émigrés lived in Syria before the community immigrated to the United States. Others note that the term Sephardic is especially useful for inclusivity, as the Syrian community has incorporated Lebanese and Egyptian Jews and “Sephardic” provides greater breadth than just Syrian. Additionally, some see it as a way to situate their identity in relation to Ashkenazi Jewry, as a label that is more easily understood.

The term Sephardic coexists comfortably with more localized identities, which are often used depending on context. For instance, individuals may highlight their Syrian, Egyptian, or Sephardic identity depending on the audience or situation. Notably, the term Mizrahi is not used within this community, a fact that aligns with

the community's immigration history and the historical development of the term itself.

Despite using the term Sephardic, community members often do not feel a strong connection to other Sephardic communities outside Brooklyn. As Joanna, a 43-year-old third generation Syrian American explained:

“We'll use the word Sephardic [but we mean Syrian]. It's almost like Lebanese is a subset of the Syrian community, not necessarily of the Sephardic community. I think [by us] 'Syrian' almost became a replacement word for a Sephardic community. [We say Sephardic but we mean] really Syrian. ...

[Our community] is almost like a sect of the Sephardic community. Like, there's a Sephardic community in Long Island, let's say, that feels Sephardic, but not Syrian.”

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Community members identify as Sephardic, name their institutions Sephardic, and take great pride in this identity.



For this interviewee, as for many others, “Sephardic” is often used as a shorthand for “Syrian”—a community that has comfortably expanded to include Egyptian and Lebanese Jews within its fold—while still maintaining clear distinctions between their community and other Sephardic Jews outside Brooklyn. It is common for community members to differentiate between “the Syrian community” and “the Sephardic community” in conversation, reflecting a layered identity that shifts depending on the context.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Syrian Jews maintain a deep connection to their Jewish heritage in Syria but overwhelmingly have no allegiance to, or relationship with, the contemporary Syrian people, the Assad regime, or the new government that replaced it following Assad’s fall as this report was being finalized. This disconnect stems from several historical and social factors.

Early Syrian Jewish immigrants to the United States arrived when Syria was still part of the Ottoman Empire, long before it became a modern nation-state. As a result, they never developed a sense of nationalistic attachment to Syria as a country. For those who emigrated after Syria’s establishment as a nation-state, memories of their homeland are deeply intertwined with state-sponsored and societal discrimination, both before and after the founding of Israel in 1948.

Following Israel’s declaration of independence, the newly formed nationalist Arab regime in Syria viewed Jews as potential Zionists and imposed severe restrictions on their daily lives. These included limitations on emigration, constraints on commercial transactions, and prohibitions on owning a car or obtaining a telephone—all of which varied by year and decade. Syrian Military Intelligence, known as the Muhabarat, closely monitored the Jewish community to ensure compliance with state regulations.

David, an 85-year-old man, who left Damascus in the 1990s, displayed his government-issued identification during an interview, pointing out a red stamp marked “Mussawi”—a term the regime used for Jews, derived from “Mosaic” (i.e., related to Moses and following Mosaic law). The government mandated that Jews include this designation in their official documents.

SYRIAN JEWS FACED SEVERE STATE RESTRICTIONS AFTER 1948:

(with variation across decades)



1 Systemic discrimination and social exclusion



2 Strict limits on emigration



3 Surveillance by Syrian military intelligence (Mukhabarat)

Jewish movement was restricted, and those caught attempting to escape Syria without government permission faced severe punishment; their family members were often tortured for information.

Eddy, a 45-year-old man who immigrated to the US at age 14 in the 1980s, described his childhood in Syria under these complex and often contradictory conditions. On one hand, he felt a natural affinity for Syria, saying,

“Whenever Syria played in a soccer match, of course, I rooted for them—it was my country, right?”

Yet at the same time, he often concealed his Jewish identity in his neighborhood and non-Jewish school for protection. He experienced bullying and even violence whenever people discovered he was Jewish.

Eddy recalled that at his non-Jewish school in Syria, students were required to recite ideological slogans every morning.

“As we saluted the Syrian flag, we chanted: ‘Our goals are unity, freedom, and socialism. Our enemies are Zionism, Imperialism, and Apartheid.’”

NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- ➔ Most of our interviewees mark “white” or “other” when asked about race or ethnicity on forms or in interviews.
- ➔ Many express a desire to self-identify as Middle Eastern or simply as Jewish.
- ➔ Interviewees are generally unfamiliar with—or do not personally identify with—the term “Jews of color.”

The government promoted a dual narrative: Zionism was cast as a European colonial project that sought to displace Arabs, while Jews in Syria were told they were loyal citizens whose Judaism was solely a religious identity, disconnected from Zionism.

This contradictory stance—simultaneously vilifying Zionism while insisting that Syria was tolerant of its Jewish citizens, despite barring their emigration and severely discriminating against them—defined the oppression that shaped Jewish life in Syria. For many Syrian Jews, these experiences severed any connection to the modern Syrian state. While they take great pride in their Jewish heritage in Syria, they primarily view the country as one that mistreated them and has been perpetually at war with the Jewish state, Israel.

For Isaac, an 87-year-old man, who came to the US as a refugee from Egypt, this disconnection extended beyond his experiences in Egypt to a broader sense of alienation from Arab identity. When asked if he identified as an “Arab Jew,” he strongly rejected the label, responding, “*The Arabs hate the Jews.*”

For Syrian Jews, the few remaining ties to their ancestral land are linked to the graves of their ancestors, old synagogues, and historical remnants of their

once-thriving community. In America, they honor Syria’s Jewish past but largely reject its present-day Muslim-majority population and nation-state.

Thus, Syrian Jewish identity is layered: a deep pride in their Jewish past in Syria yet no affiliation with its current government or society. They hold on to elements of Arabic language but not an Arab identity. Their connection is to the Jewish Syria of the past—not to the Syria of today.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Syrian Jews in this community typically report selecting “white” or “other” when presented with racial or ethnic classification options. Many express dissatisfaction with these choices, wishing for the option to select “Middle Eastern” to better reflect their heritage. Others say they would prefer to write “Jewish,” as it feels truer to their identity than any external racial label.

The category “Jews of color” is not used within the Syrian Jewish community. When asked, most were unfamiliar with it as a term that might apply to them. Some reacted by dismissing it as a political identity that doesn’t align with their views or represent their interests. When Maurice, a 42-year-old man and great-grandson of immigrants who self-identifies as “black hat,” was

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Eddy recalled that at his non-Jewish school in Syria, students were required to recite ideological slogans every morning. “As we saluted the Syrian flag, we chanted: ‘Our goals are unity, freedom, and socialism. Our enemies are Zionism, Imperialism, and Apartheid.’”

asked how he would respond if someone referred to him as a JOC because he is Syrian, he replied,

“I would think that they’re one of those crazy pronoun people.”²²

When asked about terms like “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” the same interviewee expressed discomfort, saying:

“I get very nervous from that. Those are all liberal words that were created in the modern world, and I don’t like them.”

These responses reflect the ways in which Syrian Jews see their identity as distinct from broader racial and political frameworks, especially those they view as originating in progressive political frameworks and milieus. They prefer to maintain their unique heritage without adopting labels they perceive as inauthentic, externally imposed, or reflective of political positions at odds with their values.

DENOMINATIONS

Historically, the Syrian Jewish community did not organize itself within the denominational frameworks commonly used in American Ashkenazi broader Jewish world. As Daniel, a 47-year-old man, explained:

“We don’t use the terms like in the general broader Jewish world... ‘Oh, I’m Orthodox, I’m Conservative, I’m [Reform], I’m Modern Orthodox’... Religion-wise, we’ve always said, yeah, we’re Sephardic. That’s what we are. That’s our religion. We’re Sephardic. Now, we don’t really do the denomination thing of religion. Religion is, do we believe in God? You’re religious... The details, that’s between you and God and you figure that out, but you’re religious right now.”

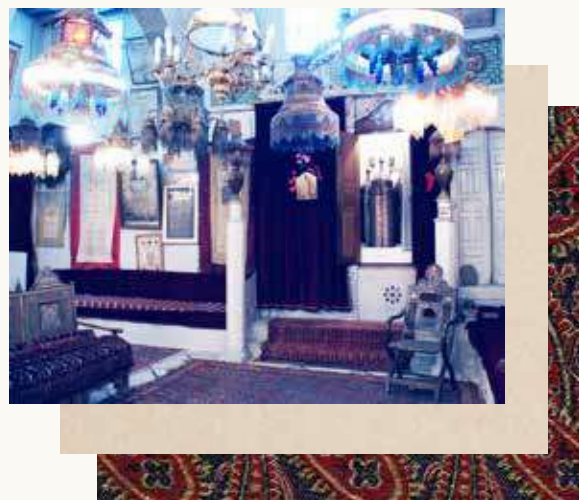
Community members take pride in their “traditional” wide spectrum of religious practice, which allows for diversity of practice within a traditional framework. For example, some Syrians keep Shabbat rigorously, while others attend synagogue but might also watch TV afterward. They also value their integration into broader American society while maintaining social cohesiveness

and tradition. It is not uncommon to meet Syrian women, for example, who observe the religious laws of family purity but, when they’re out in Manhattan, are indistinguishable in dress from the American majority.

In practice, however, the community’s observances increasingly align with Ashkenazi Orthodoxy and the label of Orthodoxy is increasingly normalized to self-identify. Some of the commonalities with Orthodoxy include non-egalitarian religious practices, adherence to kosher guidelines, and generally viewing Jewish law as obligatory. Over time, Ashkenazi Orthodox influence has grown, partly because the community initially lacked its own infrastructure to train rabbis, often sending young men to study in Ashkenazi yeshivot. While cultural and ritual differences persist, and some remain uncomfortable with the label Orthodox, there is broad comfort with Ashkenazi Orthodoxy as the closest denominational (and increasingly political) fit.

Institutionally, the community often aligns with Ashkenazi Orthodox organizations when engaging with the broader Jewish world. For instance, the Haredi part of the community is heavily involved with Agudath Israel, many institutions partner with the Orthodox Union and the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA), and a growing number of Syrian Jews attend Yeshiva University.

Denominational labels are occasionally invoked within the community, though terms like “Reform” are often used as cautionary examples, symbolizing the risks of assimilation and departure from tradition. This reflects the community’s desire to preserve its distinct Sephardic identity while navigating its place in the broader Jewish world.



Community

MAJOR COMMUNAL INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS

The Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn is supported by an impressive array of institutions and organizations that serve as the backbone of its tight-knit network. Among the most prominent is the Sephardic Community Center, which functions much like a JCC, providing a wide range of community services and programs. Similarly, the DSN Center (Deal Sephardic Network) in Deal serves as the JCC for the nearby satellite community.

The community's spiritual life is anchored by flagship synagogues such as Shaare Zion, though the sheer number of important synagogues across Brooklyn makes it impossible to list them all. Education is another pillar, with a robust network of schools including day schools like Magen David Yeshivah, Yeshivah of Flatbush, Barkai Yeshivah, and others. Haredi day schools such as Ateret Torah schools, YDE, Yeshivat Shaare Torah, and others are expanding at a significant rate to meet growing demand.

Even beyond its vibrant religious and educational institutions, the community provides critical support systems. Cemeteries, such as the main one at the old Magen David synagogue on 67th Street, serve as enduring links to the past. Social welfare organizations play a vital role, with the Sephardic Bikkur Holim standing out as an essential institution offering cradle-to-grave support. Its services include everything from senior services, financial support, mental health, to fertility assistance and postpartum care. The Morris I. Franco Cancer Center is a state of the art center providing support for anyone who has cancer - wigs for cancer patients, family counseling, and doctor referrals. There are many other institutions ranging from support for drug addiction, to mental health counseling, to career coaching, to schools for special need children.

The community also extends its influence into political and vocational spheres. The Sephardic Community Federation serves as its political arm, while programs



COMMUNITY INFRASTRUCTURE & INSTITUTIONS

SELECT CORE INSTITUTIONS



- Sephardic Community Center in Brooklyn, NY & DSN Center in Deal, NJ
- Synagogues: Dozens of synagogues, including the historic Shaare Zion
- Robust School Network:
 - ▶ Day Schools: Ateret Torah, Barkai Yeshiva, Magen David Yeshivah, Shaare Torah, YDE, Yeshiva of Flatbush, and others.

SELECT SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS



- Sephardic Bikkur Holim: A comprehensive social services organization providing mental health counseling, senior services, fertility support, abuse prevention, and more.
- Morris I. Franco Community Cancer Center: A state-of-the-art support center offering resources and care for cancer patients and their families.

ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS



- Sephardic Community Federation: An organization seeking to represent and further the political interests of this community

THE TAKEAWAY:

The community's infrastructure is vast, deeply resourced, and interconnected across all facets of Jewish life

like Propel help train women in vocational work. Furthermore, the Sephardic Community Alliance acts as an umbrella organization for “white hat” and centrist institutions, coordinating efforts across the community.

These are just a few highlights of the vast network of resources and institutions that make the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn one of the most well-organized and well-resourced in the Jewish world.

MORAL FRAMEWORKS

Community and family

Morality in the Syrian Jewish community is deeply collectivist, characterized by a strong sense of self-sufficiency and cohesion. Family and communal ties shape nearly every aspect of life, with a preference for marriage within the community and strong participation in communal institutions. High expectations are placed on maintaining a lifestyle that includes religious engagement, social connectivity, and seasonal migration to Deal, a hallmark of Syrian Jewish life.

For many, this structure fosters a deep sense of security and belonging. Natalie, a 33-year-old Brooklyn native, described how growing up in the community provided her with a built-in support system:

“It’s incredible. It’s the best. I feel so lucky that I grew up in this community. We have all the support that we need. Thank God we feel safe. As a Jew, I feel like I have a very strong identity and I’m very empowered. I have a support system, I have family around.”

Being part of the community also means feeling a connection to any Syrian Jew she might meet, even if they are strangers.

“Even if I don’t really know the person [from the community] so well, but I run into them in the street, I still feel that warmth emanating wherever I go.”

DEEP HISTORICAL ROOTS

91

GENERATIONS

One interviewee, Daniel, shared that his family has traced its lineage back 91 generations—reflecting the deep pride in ancestry and tradition felt by many in the community.

This collectivist ethos also shapes how the community navigates change. Mel, a 60-year-old man, explained that while Syrian Jews are not resistant to progress, they are cautious about rapid societal changes, often prioritizing the preservation of their traditions and values over immediate adaptation:

“The Syrian community is a lower C conservative. They move slowly, and they’re not necessarily looking to shake things up. There’s this idea of protecting and keeping the community together by fending off outside societal forces.”

For Mel, this conservatism is not just a feature of the Haredi or “right-wing” segments of the community but a broader mindset shared by mainstream Syrian families who are fully integrated into professional and social spheres.

“It’s an ethic among a lot of mainstream Syrian families who [are widely integrated in] the business world, socially, and traveling.” He is careful to clarify that these families are not “backward,” but rather, they seek to “hedge against rushing headlong into modernity.”

At the core of this gradual approach to change is the primacy of family. While some communities may sever ties over ideological or religious differences, Mel emphasized that in the Syrian Jewish world, family remains the anchor:

“That’s how we’ve been able to tolerate—and even thrive—despite the contradictions in place. Because if you view your family as family, then you don’t just throw them out because they cross a line.”

“

The Syrian community is a lower C conservative. They move slowly, and they’re not necessarily looking to shake things up.

This commitment to continuity is also evident in residential patterns. While many Jewish communities experience migration due to religious or professional reasons—and there is often no expectation that people will remain in the neighborhoods where they were raised—the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn continues to idealize residential continuity. One interviewee contrasted this with Ashkenazi trends, noting the stability within Syrian neighborhoods:

“In the Ashkenazi world, everybody’s children live somewhere else. Every house that goes up for sale in the Jewish communities has some other Ashkenazi person moving to Lakewood, to the Five Towns, to here, to there, because, ‘My children moved away. Why do I want to be here?’ And you see that the Brooklyn community just keeps growing. Nobody’s moving, everybody’s staying. And I love that.”

Institutions also play a critical role in reinforcing these values, embedding religious, social, and educational structures into daily life. Joanna described how communal institutions reinforce and seamlessly integrate different aspects of life:

“Our lifestyle is ingrained. It’s a communally ingrained lifestyle. It’s centered around the yeshiva, around the shul, around our friends and family.”

As Daniel explained,

“Okay, so the Syrian community has a very powerful history. I like to use the term the golden chain... We have things like this family tree which traces 91 generations... And that golden chain, to me, is a very... For me, very powerful. I’m into my roots, I’m into the tribe, I’m into the tribe, I’m into the tribe of Israel.... I love and have great gratitude for the fact that I was born, that my Neshama [soul] was like, selected and opted into this body, into this physical world that connects on this chain back to the origin story of our people who have this future story as well. The Syrian community has been quite effective historically at maintaining that chain very strong without a terrible amount of attrition.”

Home and Hospitality

Individuals in the Syrian Jewish community speak with pride about their strong culture of investing in the home—creating a warm, welcoming space that exudes beauty, abundance, and a sense of comfort for both family and guests.

Daniel describes this with a word that is very popular: *suffeh*. He translated *suffeh* as

“a way of holding the home, a way of presenting. ... warmth, dignity, and grace.” When a home has suffeh it means it is welcoming and warm. It is so not just for its family but for guests who will experience hospitality that is “gracious” and “welcoming.”

This emphasis on creating a welcoming and presentable home reflects the community’s deeply ingrained values of warmth and graciousness. Many view the *suffeh* of a home as integral to what binds the community together. As one mother Vivien, 54-year-old woman, explained, she strives to make her home the most comfortable, happy, and customized space for her children and grandchildren because she wants them to keep coming back.

Community rabbis have even remarked that the secret to the community’s continuity lies in traditions like the preparation of Kibbeh Hamed—a beloved dish often served on Shabbat—is a tangy, stew-like soup featuring meat-filled kibbeh balls made from rice flour and gently simmered in broth. This iconic dish embodies the



FOODS POPULAR IN THE SYRIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY



Lahmajin & Kibbeh: meat appetizers

Lahmajin is a thin flatbread topped with spiced ground meat, while kibbeh is a bulgur-and-meat dumpling, often fried or baked

Sambousak: cheese appetizer

Sambousak is a flaky pastry filled with salty cheese, typically shaped into half-moons and baked or fried until golden



nurturing and inviting culture that defines the Syrian Jewish home, serving as a symbol of the community's commitment to preserving family bonds and traditions.

POLITICS

Generally, this Syrian Jewish community is politically and socially conservative. Community members are primarily motivated by support for Israel, economic concerns, the desire for safer neighborhoods, and opposition to progressive cultural shifts, which they view as threats to their traditional way of life.

The community is overwhelmingly Zionist, with unwavering loyalty to Israel, even within Haredi circles where support for the IDF remains robust. However, making aliyah [i.e., moving to Israel] is not a significant priority for all but a few families.

Members have hosted fundraisers for Donald Trump and generally support right-wing political causes. However, in New York's local elections, they often back Democrats aligned with their community's values, and many support AIPAC and its bipartisan approach to Israel advocacy.

The community's social conservatism extends beyond US politics. On social and culture war issues—such as gender ideology—there is generally broad consensus with positions on the political right, though conversations and differing perspectives continue to emerge.

The community also broadly holds socially conservative positions on the role of women in religious life, with restrictions on their ability to hold religious leadership positions in the community similar to Haredi Jewish communities.

Historically, there has been hesitancy around

political participation, shaped by the community's experiences in Arab countries where political involvement was often prohibited or dangerous. This dynamic is shifting rapidly. Institutions like the Sephardic Community Federation are actively fostering political awareness and activism. The community has increased its involvement with AIPAC and regularly hosts fundraisers for political leaders. In Deal, Syrian individuals have even run for local office to shape neighborhoods conducive to communal life. In the November 2024 election, the first Syrian Jewish man, Joey Saban, ran for state assembly. Although he narrowly lost, his campaign energized the community and marked a new chapter in its political engagement. Propel, an organization that provides career support for women who did not follow traditional college paths, recently launched a new program to train community members for careers in public service and advocacy.

BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING

This Syrian Jewish community has established a unique boundary mechanism known as the *Takkana*, an edict introduced by community rabbis in 1936, during a time of increasing interaction with American society, to forbid marriage to converts. Enacted as a safeguard against intermarriage with non-Jews, the *Takkana* goes beyond the parameters of accepted *Halakha* [Jewish law]. Reaffirmed multiple times over the decades, the *Takkana* carries significant social consequences for those who violate it.

While the *Takkana* has drawn criticism from outside the community for contradicting Jewish law, which emphasizes the full acceptance of converts, it enjoys

widespread support within the community. Many see it as essential for preserving their distinct way of life, which they argue no other non-Haredi Jewish community has maintained to the same degree. Community members insist that the *Takkana* functions as a “local ordinance” governing marriage within their community, rather than a rejection of converts more broadly. They maintain that converts are fully accepted in other religious contexts, such as male converts being counted in a minyan (prayer quorum), and that outside their community, they support full integration and inclusion of converts—including those married to Syrian Jews who have chosen to live beyond the community’s boundaries.

While the Brooklyn-based community has thick norms and boundaries, some individuals describe themselves as being “half in and half out,” meaning that they choose when to function inside the community and its norms and when to opt out of it. Some individuals distance themselves by stepping away from formal institutions or formal networks or by moving away, such as to Manhattan, while engaging with the community especially through informal networks of family and friends. Self-selection out of the community is more common among individuals who do not align with the

community’s conservative norms, views or lifestyles.

Individuals not born into the community can typically join it through marriage. Some of those who marry in successfully assimilate into its tight-knit social fabric, while others struggle to fully integrate and learn all the communal norms. It is very rare for someone who didn’t marry in and does not have some ethnic or family connection—say an Ashkenazi Jew—to join the community and become embedded in its social life.

COMMUNAL CHALLENGES

To begin, many view the growing division between the “black hats” (Haredi-leaning members) and “white hats” (more traditional but less strict members) as a sign of disunity that follows dangerous patterns seen in the Ashkenazi community. At the same time, some community members express concern about a small but noticeable segment becoming more secular.

Others note the tremendous financial pressures that come with living well in the community. Real estate in Brooklyn, day school tuitions, camp fees, vacations in Deal, expectations around homes, hosting, ceremonies, and fashion all create significant financial strain. Ezra, a 42-year-old with multiple children attending a local Yeshiva, described the burden as “financially very hard.” The combination of day school tuition and camp fees become prohibitive because these are very expensive norms that are part of “keeping up with the Joneses,” in his words, within this community. The financial pressure is exacerbated by how tight-knit the community is, with constant comparisons possible due to this proximity. For example, Ezra described feeling the pressure to throw a wedding as nice “that last guy that did it.”

Young Syrians raised in a fully immersive Syrian community sometimes struggle with the culture shock of being in Ashkenazi-majority spaces, such as on college campuses or study programs in Israel, where, for the first time, they are a minority among Jews. Similarly, Syrians who live outside the community’s Flatbush hub—whether in Manhattan, Great Neck, or Teaneck—must learn to navigate life in places where Ashkenazi Jews are the majority.



Interactions

ASHKENAZI INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURE

In the early decades of the Syrian Jewish community, there was little integration or collaboration within formal Ashkenazi institutions. This began to shift in the 1960s and 1970s, especially as young Syrian men attended Ashkenazi religious institutions for their education and then returned to the Syrian community. Today, while the community collaborates with Ashkenazi institutions, they do so in ways that preserve their distinct identity. Syrians are active, for instance, in UJA Federation of New York,²³ the Orthodox Union, Agudath Israel, and pro-Israel organizations like AIPAC.

Some community members feel that the Ashkenazi population misunderstands them and, at times, looks down on them—something that feels intolerable to this proud community. This often comes up when describing interactions in Ashkenazi-majority spaces. Joanna, for example, shared her daughter’s experience in her year-abroad studying at a religious all-girls seminary where Sephardic girls were a minority: “On the first week, she felt a lot of stigma toward Syrians. She told me the girls kept saying, ‘Why are you even here? All your parents care about is you getting married.’”

Stories of this kind—Ashkenazim looking down on Syrians—are rare now but still trigger for some memories dating back to the Lower East Side, where Syrian Jews were seen as wholly different and “other” because they didn’t speak Yiddish and looked different than Jews from Eastern Europe. This history might help explain the community’s emphasis on self-reliance, building their own communal institutions, neighborhoods, and infrastructure where they are the majority. It reflects a desire to maintain their independence and cohesion while engaging with the broader Jewish world on their own terms.

OTHER SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI COMMUNITIES

As noted, there is generally very little connection or relationship between the Syrian community and other Sephardic and Mizrahi communities, with two notable exceptions. First, there is significant philanthropic support for Sephardic Jews in Israel, particularly for Haredi Sephardic yeshivot. Second, in Ashkenazi-majority neighborhoods—such as Manhattan’s Upper East side—Syrians tend to form bonds with other Sephardic Jews. At the Edmond J. Safra Synagogue, for instance, the liturgy and practices follow Syrian customs, but the congregation includes a much more diverse Sephardic crowd than in Syrian-majority spaces.

NON-JEWISH SOCIETY AND INSTITUTIONS

The Syrian community feels at ease engaging with non-Jewish culture, fashion, and mass media, and many interact regularly with non-Jewish society for business purposes. However, their social lives are overwhelmingly centered within the Syrian community.

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Some community members feel that the Ashkenazi population misunderstands them and, at times, looks down on them—something that feels intolerable to this proud community.

Distinctions

What is distinctive about this community compared to the other three?

The Syrian Jewish community stands out in several distinctive ways, each rooted in its unique history and cultural practices.

1. Ethnic Replenishment Across Generations

One of the most striking features of the Syrian Jewish community is how it absorbed a steady flow of newcomers from the Middle East over the course of a century. Unlike other Middle Eastern Jewish communities, which often settled in America during a specific time period, the Syrian community has experienced continuous replenishment, with waves of migration reinforcing its cultural and ethnic ties.

2. Independence and Strong Institutions

The community's longevity is deeply tied to its strong sense of independence. Syrian Jews have a pronounced drive to build their own institutions and not depend on other groups.

3. Longevity in America

Among Middle Eastern Jewish communities, the Syrians have one of the longest histories in America. Despite this longevity, they have retained a strong ethnic identity, defying the expectations of assimilation typically associated with immigrant groups.

Customs

1. Unique Wedding Traditions

Weddings in the Syrian Jewish community are particularly noteworthy for their lack of assigned seating and their reliance on buffets. This allows for large guest lists and shorter events, reflecting a cultural preference for socializing and movement over long, formal meals. These traditions enable

families to host frequent, inclusive celebrations while staying true to their communal values. Weddings are also paid for by the bride's family.

2. Naming Traditions

When it comes to naming children, Syrian Jews adhere faithfully to tradition, naming their children after parents. They preserve not only the names themselves but also the specific spelling.

POPULAR WORDS/ EXPRESSIONS

Mabrouk:

An Arabic expression used to offer congratulations on joyous occasions

SY:

One of the terms Syrian Jews use to describe themselves

Suffeh:

A term that reflects the ideal of homemaking and hospitality. As cookbook author Poopa Dweck writes: "a high degree of poise, an appreciation of etiquette, and an ability to create a feeling of domestic warmth that even exceeds the effusive, open-armed hospitality of Middle Eastern lore"²⁴

Note:

While Syrian Jews do not use some words common among Ashkenazi Jews—such as *mazal tov*—other terms, like *shul* or *bris*, have been adopted and are now part of the community's everyday language.

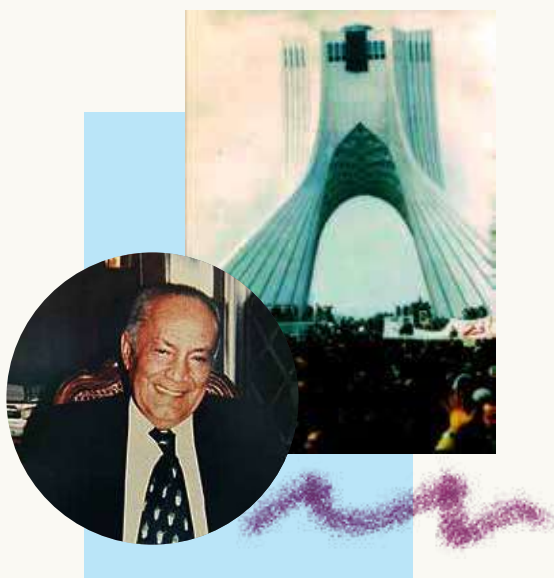
Persian Jewish Community Portrait (LA)

SECTION 1.

Background

IMMIGRATION

In the mid-1970s, the Jewish population in Iran was about 100,000, with many in the upper-middle class after several decades of upward economic mobility. Iranian Jews had a strong sense of loyalty to the Pahlavi dynasty, which they credited with advancing modernization and ending long-standing discrimination under which Jews were treated as “unclean” dhimmi (second-class citizens). This period marked significant improvements in Jewish life, fostering economic success and a sense of security.



A Note on Terminology:

In our interviews, participants primarily identified as Persian, though some also used Iranian. Several explained that Persian helps distinguish Iranian Jews from non-Jewish Iranians. Accordingly, we use Persian throughout most of this report, while still reflecting the variation in language used by community members.

We include Persian Jews as part of this study of Sephardic communities because many expressed comfort and alignment with the term Sephardic to describe their liturgy and religious customs. At the same time, Persian Jews often see themselves as having a distinct and ancient tradition that predates the broader Sephardic diaspora. Younger—and especially more progressive—Persian Jews are increasingly adopting the term Mizrahi.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic marked a turning point for Iranian Jews. Between 1978 and 1981, widespread social and political instability, the regime’s increasing anti-Western and anti-Zionist rhetoric, and the Iran-Iraq war fueled Jewish anxiety. The new regime’s fanaticism intensified fears, particularly following the prominent execution of Habib Elghanian, a well-known businessman, philanthropist, and leader of the Tehran Jewish community. Elghanian was arrested by the Islamic regime, accused of being a “Zionist spy” and of having ties to Israel and the Shah’s government. In May 1979, he was executed by firing squad, sending shockwaves through the Jewish community and serving as a grim warning of the dangers faced under the new regime. Many of our interviewees specifically cited Elghanian’s execution as a decisive factor in their families’ decisions to flee.

This fear was not limited to Elghanian’s case. One interviewee, an older woman, shared that her husband had been imprisoned and their properties confiscated because of their prior connections to the monarchy. Stories like hers contributed to an atmosphere of profound uncertainty and fear, prompting what many describe as an exodus from their homes. The combination of targeted persecution, arrests, and executions

created an untenable situation, driving a mass emigration of Jews from Iran.

For some, departure was orderly and on their own terms, with families quietly leaving Iran as the Shah's rule crumbled. However, for others, the journey was marked by fear and unpredictability. One interviewee recounted the uncertainty of simply going to the airport, unsure whether they would be blacklisted, detained, or stopped before boarding a plane. In the years following the revolution, many Iranian Jews escaped through perilous routes via Pakistan or Turkey, not knowing what awaited them.

By the end of the 1980s, the majority of Iranian Jews had left or fled the country, settling in destinations such as Los Angeles, New York, and Israel. However, a small Jewish community remains in Iran today, estimated at about 8,000-10,000 people. Those who remain are described as overwhelmingly lacking the financial resources or practical means to leave, particularly in smaller cities like Shiraz and Isfahan, where families are poorer and often rooted by local ties and children. Other barriers include challenges in obtaining professional licenses (such as in medicine), a lack of transferable professional skills or language proficiency, and ownership of small businesses that provide a livelihood in Iran but would be unsustainable at US costs.

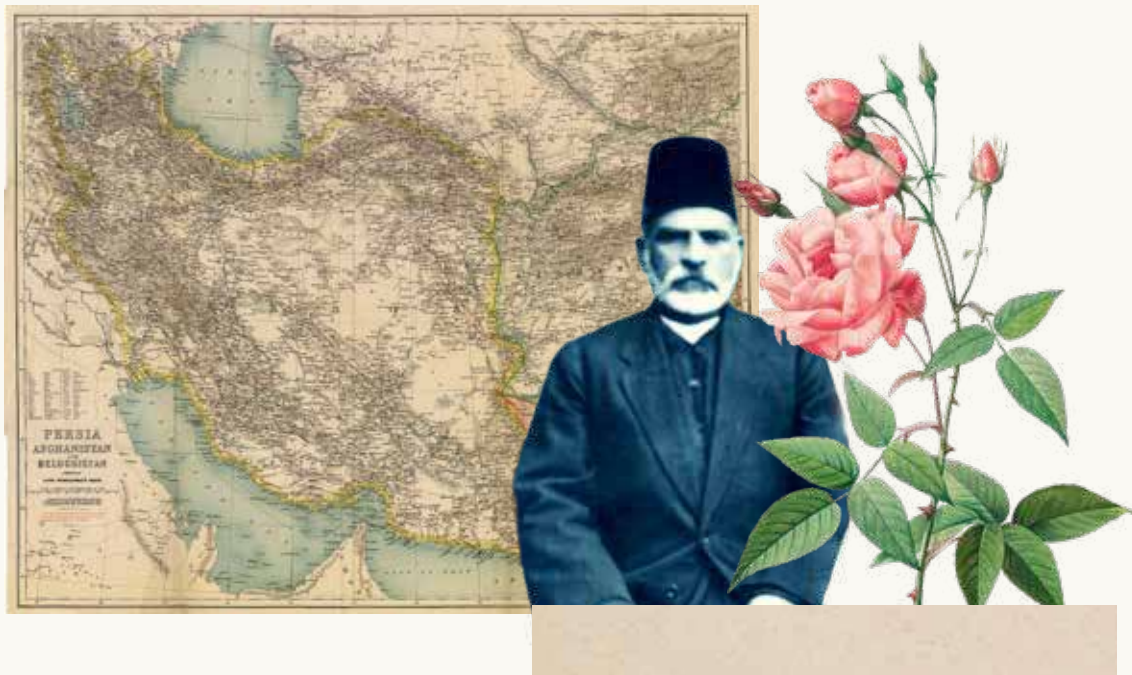
The Iranian Revolution remains a relatively recent event, and some of our interviewees spoke of enduring family trauma. Shirin, a 74 year-old woman born in Iran who fled with her family reflected on the impact of her experience:

"We went through a very difficult time. We had to come here and start all over again—it was not easy, especially with little children. We had everything, and then suddenly we had nothing. We were important, and then we were no one. We had to rebuild everything from the ground up."

Her words capture the profound sense of loss and resilience felt by many Iranian Jewish families who fled their homes and were forced to begin anew.

PLACES OF SETTLEMENT & COMMUNITY SIZE

More than half of post-Revolution Jewish immigrants moved to Los Angeles County, drawn to a smaller community of Persian Jews that had settled in the area. The new immigrants concentrated in neighborhoods like Beverly Hills, Fairfax, Pico-Robertson, and the San Fernando Valley. The city's growing Persian Jewish population soon became a pull factor in itself with established networks providing stability and a familiar culture.

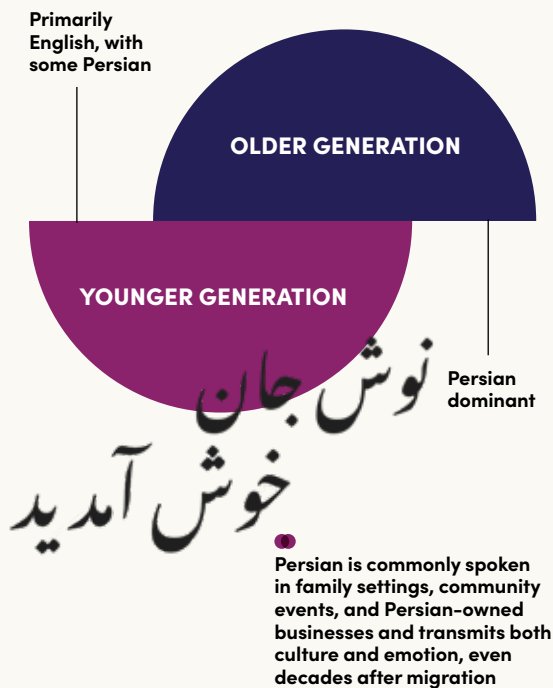


The 2021 Los Angeles Jewish Community Study estimated based on survey research that there are 22,500 Persian Jews in Los Angeles. Based on their own calculations, community leaders in LA estimate that the community size is between 50,000–70,000 people. The true number likely falls somewhere in between, but pinpointing it remains a challenge.

LANGUAGES

Persian remains a cornerstone of cultural continuity within the Persian Jewish community, particularly among older generations who immigrated from Iran. The language is commonly spoken in family settings, community events, and Persian-owned businesses. While younger members primarily speak English, most have a working knowledge of Persian, enabling them to communicate with grandparents and incorporate Persian slang, preserving both a practical and emotional connection to their roots.

ENGLISH VS. PERSIAN USAGE ACROSS GENERATIONS:



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We had everything, and then suddenly we had nothing... We were important, and then we were no one.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Many immigrants initially faced significant economic challenges upon arriving in Los Angeles. Professionals such as doctors and lawyers struggled to continue their careers due to licensing and language barriers, often pivoting to new professions. Over time, however, the Persian Jewish community has largely become middle and upper class, with education and stable, prestigious careers deeply valued. Young people are strongly encouraged to pursue advanced degrees in fields like medicine, law, and business, reflecting the community’s emphasis on economic stability, self-sufficiency, and upward mobility. Entrepreneurial ventures and real estate also play a prominent role, highlighting the community’s drive for financial independence and reputation.

At the same time, many of our interviewees described the immense social and cultural pressure associated with this upward mobility. As Shirin noted, “Everyone knows each other. They need to have a profession, they have to have good means of living, and a lot of them are judged by how they look and dress—appearances, appearances.” She emphasized the status-driven nature of the community, where brand names and a polished public image hold significant weight. This pressure to excel—whether through professional achievements or social standing—can take a toll, as some individuals struggle to cope with the intense demands of communal judgment and competition.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

Persian Jews will often describe themselves as traditional, aligned with how many Middle Eastern Jews

self-identify. Religious observance in the Persian Jewish community spans a broad spectrum. Weekly Shabbat observance remains a key tradition, with family-centered gatherings that bring extended networks together. High holidays such as Yom Kippur and Passover are also widely celebrated, serving as focal points for religious continuity.

The community's traditionalism incorporates two distinct strands. First, many community members identify religiously as "traditional," blending Persian Jewish customs with more flexible religious practices. Second, traditionalism refers to the centrality of family life, including among the many who describe themselves as secular. This emphasis reflects cultural patterns of Jews in Tehran, where the Jewish community was also highly secular.

At the same time, the Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles is notable for its religious diversity. Significant numbers have integrated comfortably into Conservative, Reform and Orthodox institutions including a visible Haredi presence.

This unique phenomenon highlights the evolving religious landscape of Persian Jewry in Los Angeles, where Persian Jews span denominational institutional affiliations. However, these affiliations do not necessarily determine whether individuals consider themselves "traditional"; rather, they reflect the community's comfort engaging with diverse religious spaces while maintaining their own traditions.

FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS

Children often live with their parents into their twenties or early thirties, fostering strong familial bonds during emerging adulthood. Extended family members, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, frequently reside nearby, creating tight-knit, multi-generational networks. Young adults, especially women, typically remain in the family home until marriage, reflecting cultural values of family support and a gradual path to independence. Even after marriage, many families stay geographically close, preserving daily interactions and deepening connections, while those who move out often prioritize proximity, ensuring family traditions and a sense of community endure across generations. Many Persian Jews prioritize celebrating Shabbat and holidays with their families even as they do not observe the traditional practice of

not traveling on Shabbat or holidays. The ability to drive allows them to maintain these traditions, even in the sprawling landscape of Los Angeles.

COMMUNAL INSTITUTIONS

The Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles is anchored by a network of synagogues, advocacy groups, and philanthropic organizations. While Persian Jews have actively integrated into established Jewish institutions across the city, they have also built their own communal infrastructure to preserve and nurture their traditions. This dual approach—both establishing independent institutions and engaging with broader Jewish organizations—reflects a commitment to maintaining Persian Jewish identity while adapting to the wider Los Angeles Jewish landscape.



Identities

SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI

Persian Jews in Los Angeles navigate the labels “Sephardic” and “Mizrahi” in diverse ways. For many, the label “Sephardic” feels familiar and accessible, especially in predominantly Ashkenazi American Jewish spaces, where distinctions between Middle Eastern and Iberian Jewish heritage are less commonly made.

For many Persian Jews, identifying as Sephardic reflects their alignment with Sephardic law and customs and underscores their shared heritage with the broader MENA Sephardic diaspora. For example, the prominent Nessah Synagogue—established in Los Angeles by and

for Iranian Jews—states on its website that it “upholds the traditions and customs of Iranian Jews according to Orthodox, Sephardic Halacha.” However, many Persian Jews prefer to emphasize their distinct Persian background without fully adopting a broader pan-ethnic identity. The Eretz Synagogue and Cultural Center, for instance, highlights its “Persian Jewish culture” rather than explicitly referencing Sephardic traditions.

A smaller but growing number of young Jews within the community find that “Mizrahi” aligns more closely with their heritage as Jews from the Middle East. Molly, who used to identify as Sephardic but now identifies as Mizrahi, explains how, for her, “the differentiator” between the two labels lies in her family’s history and the understanding that they did not trace their ancestry back to Spain.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

Persian Jews in Los Angeles navigate layered identities that deeply connect them to their Iranian roots while also distinctly marking their Jewish identity. For many older immigrants especially, Iran is a meaningful part of their identity, representing a homeland filled with family memories and cultural roots, and many of them speak of it with enduring affection for pre-revolutionary Iran under the Shah. Among younger generations, this connection often feels more symbolic, passed down through stories, language, and cultural practices shared by their parents and grandparents but not tied to their personal experiences. Some of our interviewees noted that while younger Persian Jews often distance themselves from their parents’ culture in adolescence, many later reverse course, developing a renewed appreciation for their heritage as they grow older.



Many Persian Jews in Los Angeles prefer to identify as “Persian” rather than “Iranian,” distancing their cultural pride from Iran’s current political regime. As Darya, a 27-year-old woman explains,

“Most Persian Jews don’t call themselves Iranian Jews...Iran has like a bad taste in our mouth.”

Evan elaborates:

“I identify as Persian because it separates between the Iranian regime and government and kind of feels more to what that country was before the revolution... it’s about the culture, the values, the world that used to exist in Iran.”

RACE AND ETHNICITY

In this study, and in consultation with community leaders and scholars, we chose to prioritize the adjective “Persian” rather than “Iranian,” based on the preferences expressed by our interview subjects. While we occasionally use “Iranian” where appropriate—particularly when reflecting public or institutional language—our overall use of “Persian” aligns with how many community members describe themselves in internal and cultural contexts. Notably, leaders of outward-facing organizations, such as federations or advocacy groups, often prefer “Iranian” for external communications, whereas “Persian” is more commonly used within the community to distinguish Jewish Iranians from non-Jewish Iranians.

In the American racial landscape, Persian Jews in Los Angeles face complexities in defining their racial and

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Most Persian Jews don’t call themselves Iranian Jews... Iran has like a bad taste in our mouth.

NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- ➔ “Sephardic” is often the default identity label in Ashkenazi-majority spaces.
- ➔ Many Persian Jews use “Sephardic” to reflect halakhic alignment and diaspora connection, especially in religious or communal contexts.
- ➔ At the same time, some also emphasize “Persian” to highlight communal, heritage, and cultural distinctiveness.
- ➔ “Mizrahi” is gaining ground among younger Jews, often framed as a more geographically accurate term.

ethnic identities. American racial labels like white, Asian, or other are limited in capturing the distinct identities and experiences of Persian Jews, leading to a sense of ambiguity and frustration in defining where they fit within the broader US racial and ethnic framework. When given the chance on forms that ask for this kind of information, some Persian Jews said they write in Middle Eastern, which is currently not an option in census questions.

Many Persian Jews feel that identifying as “white” in particular fails to reflect their Middle Eastern heritage and lived experiences as both a religious and cultural minority. Yet those with lighter skin often experience a form of “white-passing” privilege that allows them to blend into predominantly white spaces. David, a 26-year-old man captures this tension:

“If my only option is white, I will begrudgingly choose that, but I don’t identify as white, and I never did... I also acknowledge that I’m white-presenting because I’m lighter skinned. And so, I also am mindful that I benefit from certain privileges that people who are more explicitly of color don’t.”

JEW OF COLOR

For some Persian Jews, especially among younger and more progressive ones, the term JOC holds appeal because it acknowledges the unique challenges and experiences they face within predominantly Ashkenazi Jewish spaces.

“I feel like, culturally, I am a Jew of color,” Sahra, a 37-year-old woman said. “There’s a lot of things about American culture, white culture that I had to learn.”

This shift reflects a broader re-evaluation of racial and ethnic identities, especially for those who feel that their darker features, cultural traditions, and Middle Eastern heritage set them apart from what’s often perceived as the “standard” Jewish experience in America.

On the other hand, many Persian Jews describe it as a term applied to them by others rather than one they would naturally use to describe themselves. Others share objections to the term, feeling that the term may reduce a complex cultural identity to a single racial category that doesn’t fully capture the nuances of their experiences. Additionally, some Persian Jews feel that the term JOC risks dividing Jewish identity along racial lines, which can feel out of step with their



understanding of Jewish unity and shared tradition. For them, Jewish identity is fundamentally about a shared history, spirituality, and commitment to family and community, elements they feel are obscured by a focus on racial categories.

JEWISH DENOMINATIONS

Persian Jews in Los Angeles reflect a wide spectrum of religious observance, blending elements of Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and “traditional” practices. Many individuals have engaged with multiple denominations over time, allowing their religious identity to evolve as they adapt and explore. Batya, a 32-year-old woman, for example, shared,

“I started in Reform, but over time I just felt more connected to traditions I grew up with, so now I’d call myself more traditional.”

For many, strict denominational labels feel limiting. Instead, “traditional” is the preferred term, capturing an inclusive approach that honors family customs and Sephardic rituals. As Sahra explained,

“If somebody asks me how religious I am, I say, ‘I’m traditional,’ which means we use the holiday practice to come together as a community and as a family. We’re not necessarily observant—we’re not Shomer Shabbat or strictly kosher. It’s more about being together.”

These preferences extend to institutional affiliations as well. While synagogues like Nessah, a prominent Iranian synagogue in Los Angeles, explicitly highlight their connection to Orthodox practice, others, such as Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel and Eretz Religious and Cultural Center, describe themselves as traditional on their websites. Despite this distinction, all these synagogues reflect elements associated with Orthodox settings, such as a partition and connections to Orthodox institutional networks, including the rabbinical training of their clergy. This blend of tradition and flexibility underscores Persian Jews’ emphasis on maintaining their unique heritage while adapting to their diverse religious expressions.

Community

MAJOR COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

Synagogues

Nessah Synagogue: Located in Beverly Hills, Nessah Synagogue is one of the most prominent Persian Jewish congregations in the United States. It was established in the early 1980s by Persian Jewish immigrants fleeing Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Nessah serves as a central religious and cultural institution for Persian Jews in Los Angeles, preserving their traditions and heritage. The synagogue is led by Chief Rabbi R' David Shofet, son of Hakham Yedidia Shofet, who served as the Chief Rabbi of Iran for many decades.

Sinai Temple: Established in 1906, Sinai Temple in Westwood is a flagship Conservative synagogue and a cornerstone of Jewish life in Los Angeles. Over the years, it has grown to become one of the largest and most influential synagogues in the city. Its diverse

congregation includes a significant number of Persian Jews, who have become an integral part of its community, reflecting the adaptability and inclusivity of both the synagogue and the Persian Jewish population. Recently, Sinai Temple even elected two Persian Jews as its presidents—an acknowledgment of the community's deep-rooted presence and leadership within the synagogue.

Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel: Founded by Sephardic Jews, particularly Turkish Jews, in the 1920s, Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel has evolved to reflect the changing demographics of Los Angeles' Sephardic community. Today, it boasts a large Persian Jewish population that has helped revitalize the synagogue, with both its current and past presidents being Persian Jews.



Eretz Synagogue and Cultural Center: Eretz Synagogue and Cultural Center is a vibrant focal point for the Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles. It offers a range of religious and cultural programs, including Torah classes, lectures, concerts, and social events that celebrate Persian Jewish heritage. Founded to serve the growing Persian Jewish population, it fosters community ties and preserves its unique identity.

Persian Presence in Other Synagogues: While Persian Jews have established their own synagogues, they have also integrated into existing Jewish institutions across the city. Several historically non-Persian synagogues now have significant Persian congregations, reflecting the community's dual approach to institutional engagement. The Baghdadi-founded Kahal Joseph in Westwood has become largely Persian, while the Syrian congregation Magen David of Beverly Hills is now majority Persian as well. Valley Beth Shalom, a Conservative synagogue, offers a High Holiday service specifically geared toward

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One interviewee described growing antisemitism in his children's public school following the October 7th attacks.

Persian Jews, and Stephen S. Wise Temple, a Reform synagogue, has a large Persian membership. Persian synagogues have also emerged in Downtown Los Angeles, catering to those who work in the area, and various Chabad houses throughout the city now serve overwhelmingly Persian congregations. Even the Iranian-American Jewish Federation building houses an egalitarian yet traditionally Persian synagogue.

Smaller Synagogues in Pico-Robertson and Encino:

Persian Jews in Los Angeles have also established numerous smaller synagogues in the Pico-Robertson and Encino areas, reflecting internal religious and social divisions within the community. These smaller synagogues cater to specific religious customs and communal preferences, providing spaces for tailored spiritual engagement while preserving Persian Jewish traditions.

Educational institutions

Los Angeles does not have day schools specifically established by or geared toward Persian Jewish children. However, there are some Persian Jewish nursery schools and Hebrew schools. Families typically enroll their children in established Ashkenazi-majority Jewish community day schools or public schools. Notable public schools like Beverly Hills High School remain particularly popular due to their central location within Persian Jewish neighborhoods and strong academic reputation.

While these options are widely used, some families express dissatisfaction with the current choices. One interviewee, for example, described growing antisemitism in his children's public school following the October 7th attacks. The same interviewee reported

NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- While there are no Persian-led Jewish day schools, many families enroll in Ashkenazi-majority day schools or local public schools.
- Many families pair secular schools with after-school Jewish studies.
- In higher education, one common pathway is for Persian Jewish students to begin at Santa Monica College and later transfer to UCLA or USC.

discomfort with certain liberal Jewish day schools, where progressive views on gender and sexuality were presented as inherently Jewish, conflicting with their traditional and socially conservative understanding of Judaism. These challenges underscore the difficulty some Persian Jewish families face in finding educational environments that align with both their cultural values and religious identity.

For higher education, it is common for young Persian Jews to begin their studies at Santa Monica College, a local community college, and then transfer to UCLA or USC. At the same time, the community takes great pride in its many graduates and postgraduates who have attended Ivy League universities and excelled across diverse fields.

Advocacy and community organizations

The Iranian American Jewish Federation (IAJF): The IAJF emerged in the early 1980s as the community's umbrella organization to assist Iranian Jews fleeing the Iranian Revolution, providing vital support such as financial assistance, medical care, legal aid, and immigration services. Today 18 main Iranian American Jewish community organizations maintain their membership at, and have seat on the board of, the IAJF.

While the IAJF initially sought to collaborate with the broader Federation system, some of its leaders expressed growing reservations over the years and ultimately decided against a deeper partnership. "We are more on the conservative side," one leader explained. When probed, he identified DEI initiatives as a key point of divergence, stating that the Persian Jewish community that IAJF represents did not see itself reflected in these frameworks.

Another leader emphasized the distinct perspectives of Persian Jews on antisemitism—including their focus on threats from Muslim communities—as a factor that sets them apart.

However, this distancing does not mean a complete lack of involvement. The IAJF continues to collaborate with the Jewish Federation Council of Los Angeles on broader community-wide initiatives. Today, the IAJF primarily functions as a central hub where individuals can seek guidance and referrals to available resources.

30 Years After: Founded in 2007 by a group of Iranian American Jewish young professionals, 30 Years After aims to encourage Iranian American Jews to take on leadership roles in American political, civic, and Jewish life, bridging generational gaps and fostering greater involvement in broader communal spaces.

Younger Persian Jews, particularly progressives, have engaged in various social justice causes. Organizations like **JIMENA** (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa)—which commissioned this study—are deeply active in advocacy, working to amplify the Iranian Jewish experience. This includes advancing the place of MENA Jews in ethnic studies curricula and ensuring Iranian Jewish voices are present in conversations about Israel.

Persian Jewish involvement in advocacy also extends to global and local causes. For example, the **Woman, Life, Freedom** movement highlights the community's enduring commitment to women's rights and freedom in Iran. Similarly, JQ International, a leading LGBTQ+ Jewish organization in Los Angeles, supports Persian LGBTQ+ Jews through its JQ Persian Pride programming, creating inclusive spaces for community members.

Philanthropy

Persian Jews in Los Angeles support a wide range of causes, from local nonprofits to major institutions in the US and Israel. Unlike the other communities profiled,



GLOBAL SOLIDARITY

Persian Jews showed support for Iran's *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement

prominent Persian Jewish families have made well-publicized contributions to non-Jewish institutions, particularly in higher education. The Nazarian family has donated extensively to local universities, including Cal State Northridge and USC, and played a key role in establishing the Israel Studies Department at UCLA. They also funded the exhibition, “Light and Shadows: The Story of Iranian Jews” at the Fowler Museum at UCLA. Similarly, the Merage family has supported Jewish organizations in Orange County and contributed millions to UC Irvine, where the business school now bears their name.

Support for Israel remains a central pillar of Persian Jewish identity. Organizations such as the Magbit Foundation, which funds scholarships for Israeli students, reflect this commitment. Persian Jews have taken leadership roles and support philanthropically organizations that such as AIPAC and Friends of IDF. As Khazra, a 45-year-old man explained, “Israel philanthropy...is near and dear to our hearts.”

Other

Iranian Jewish Calendar: The widely circulated Iranian Jewish Calendar is a key resource for Persian Jews in Los Angeles. It advertises Persian-speaking and Jewish



CULTURAL ANCHORS BEYOND SYNAGOGUES

Recognized universally among interviewees, **Elat Market** in Pico-Robertson, is a Persian kosher food hub where traditional dishes, fresh herbs, Israeli products can be found

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Support for Israel remains a central pillar of Persian Jewish identity.

services—both religious and communal—while outlining Jewish holidays, Persian cultural observances, and other relevant information. The calendar is often translated into Persian and sometimes Hebrew, ensuring accessibility for older generations and preserving linguistic ties to Persian heritage.

Elat Market: Many of our interviewees found it difficult to identify Persian-run institutions in Los Angeles beyond synagogues but consistently recognized Elat Market as a key community fixture. Located in the Pico-Robertson neighborhood, Elat Market serves as a cornerstone of the Persian Jewish community, offering kosher goods with an emphasis on Persian and Middle Eastern specialties. Known for its fresh herbs, spices, nuts, traditional Persian dishes, and Israeli products, the market is more than a grocery store—it is a cultural hub. Many other Iranian Jewish kosher markets, bakeries, restaurants and catering outfits have also sprung over the years.

MORAL FRAMEWORKS

Family

Family is the nucleus of Persian Jewish life, shaping social expectations around marriage, career, and social responsibility. Within this framework, marrying within the community is encouraged, as it reinforces cultural continuity and prevents perceived dilution of cultural identity. Eli, a 28-year-old man recalls meeting his fiancée on a Birthright trip, a match supported by their shared Persian background, which “just made everything easier” for their families. This sentiment is widespread, with many like Darya feeling that shared cultural experiences—food, language, holidays—create a natural bond that helps strengthen marriages and family ties. Avar, a 33-year-old man shared a similar

sentiment about always knowing that he would return to LA:

“It was always [my plan] to come back to LA. Growing up here, it’s where family is. Family growing up in my world is such a central core aspect of life. It’s every single week Shabbat, mom’s side, dad’s side, mom’s side, dad’s side, flipping back and forth. That’s just such a strong thing in my life. Even when I was living in New York, I had a girlfriend that lived there that was the impetus of why I went to New York. But even when I went, it was always like, okay, when are you going home to LA? It was just feeling it out. At some point, it ended up being the right time.”

Family serves as the primary anchor of communal life for Persian Jews in Los Angeles, not only as a cultural value but as a defining social framework that sustains Persian Jewish tradition. With a long-standing tradition of secularism dating back to their time in Iran, many Persian Jews do not engage deeply with formal religious institutions. At the same time, there are relatively few Persian-run Jewish community organizations, particularly ones that resonate with younger, less Orthodox-leaning individuals. As a result, family gatherings take on a communal role, filling the gaps left by institutional absence. Friday night dinners with extended family function as informal gathering spaces, fostering a sense of belonging. Hani, a 28-year-old woman explained that large Persian weddings, filled with dancing and socializing late into the night, similarly serve as crucial communal events.

“There are weddings and bar and bat mitzvahs and everything is a party and a moment for everyone to

get together and that’s how the community continues and evolves.”

Shirin described the comfort she feels knowing that 500 people will come to a funeral, underscoring the way family networks create a deeply embedded support system.

Education

Education is a core community value, seen as both a source of familial pride and a strategy for communal survival. Many Persian Jews describe “algorithmic” educational paths where students start at Santa Monica College before transferring to prestigious universities like UCLA or USC. Part of these expectations include expectations to live at home, especially for young women. As Claire, a 27-year-old woman said:

“We weren’t socialized to have this sense of independence—like, “i’m just gonna go out in the world, be my own person, and take care of myself.”

While more young Persian Jews are beginning to live independently and some choose educational paths outside Los Angeles, these are still exceptions rather than the norm.

Social status

Social status and financial stability are central to the Persian Jewish community, with members expected to uphold a certain level of financial security and professionalism. Commonly pursued careers in medicine, law, and business reflect communal values around stability, reputation, and success. At the same time,

THE PERSIAN JEWISH SOCIAL FABRIC



Family is central:

Weekly Shabbat dinners and life events like weddings and funerals serve as core communal spaces



Education is strategic:

Many follow a set path—starting at Santa Monica College, then transferring to UCLA or USC—often while living at home



Social status matters:

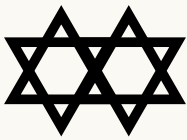
Careers in medicine, law, and business reflect expectations around professionalism, wealth, and reputation



Zionism is foundational:

Deep communal support for Israel spans generations, alongside growing civic engagement in LA politics

ZIONISM AS COMMON GROUND



Zionism functions as a unifying thread among Persian Jews, bridging differences in religious observance and political views

entrepreneurship plays a significant role in shaping the community's economic achievements. The exceptionally high rate of self-employment among Iranian Jews has contributed to their economic success and enabled them to build and sustain an "ethnic economy" that supports cultural preservation and integration in Los Angeles.

Social status and financial achievement confer both family pride and community respect, yet many feel the weight of these standards. One participant described it as a "socially political" environment, where "keeping up appearances" is crucial to maintaining standing within the community.

Zionism and politics

For the Persian Jewish community, Zionism is central to identity and inseparable from Judaism. As Charlotte, a 23-year-old woman puts it,

"[I work with an Israel advocacy organization], which is very much rooted in Persian Jewish values because our community is so Zionist."

Although Zionism is widely shared across generations, other values are less uniform.

Some younger members, though just as fervent in their Zionism, embrace more progressive social positions, particularly on LGBTQ+ rights, reflecting the liberal influences of growing up in America, and in LA.

Historically, many Persian Jews avoided public political involvement due to the persecution they experienced in Iran, with families urging caution and advising that it's safest to "stay quiet." In recent decades, however, there has been a strong spirit of political engagement and activism in LA's Persian Jewish community, with many people visibly supportive of Israel and vocal in their Jewish identity.

"Most people are a lot more proud to be Jewish and want to do as much as they can to practice, celebrate, be active politically, [and] go to rallies," observed Eli, capturing the renewed sense of duty to affirm Jewish

identity and solidarity in these times.

In terms of local office, Persian Jews have made notable strides. Jimmy Delshad, highlighted as the first Iranian American to hold public office as mayor of Beverly Hills (2007), became a symbol of this growing civic and political integration. His election received significant national and international attention, reflecting the rising prominence of Iranian Jews in LA's political and civic landscape. The community also takes pride in Sharona Nazarian, the incoming mayor of Beverly Hills, who will be the first known Iranian Jewish woman to hold this position.

Boundaries of belonging

The boundaries of belonging within the Los Angeles Persian Jewish community are shaped by a combination of traditional values and evolving norms. Zionism remains a defining pillar of the community's identity, with strong pro-Israel sentiment serving as the norm. Interviewees struggled to identify communal boundaries beyond being openly critical of Israel or rejecting Zionism, which appears to cross a clear line of acceptability. Our interviewees generally described how over time there has been greater openness to LGBTQ+ identity, though challenges persist in more Orthodox and

PERSIAN JEWISH VOICES IN PUBLIC OFFICE

Once cautious about visibility, a new generation of Persian Jews steps confidently into public leadership



Jimmy Delshad

First Iranian-American (Persian Jewish) mayor of Beverly Hills, elected in 2007 and again in 2010. He paved the way for visible civic participation.

Sharona Nazarian

Mayor of Beverly Hills—sworn in in April 2025. She is the first Iranian Jewish woman to serve as mayor in U.S. history and represents a new generation of public leadership.

traditional spaces. Similarly, while mental health issues were historically stigmatized, the organization, Iranian Friends of Etta, have helped foster greater awareness and support within the community.

Economic status plays a subtler role: while financial hardship does not result in exclusion, individuals experiencing economic struggles can feel othered in a community where upward mobility is encouraged. Family is central to the community's culture, and those who are less oriented toward family life—such as individuals who remain unmarried later in life or are divorced—may struggle to feel fully included. Inter-marriage with non-Jews is another area of concern. Our interviewees gave mixed reports, some said it is “definitely not common” and others described it as a former taboo that is now being challenged.

COMMUNAL CHALLENGES

Mental health and well-being

Mental health struggles, though less stigmatized now than in the past, run against cultural norms that encourage resilience and discourage vulnerability. Many interviewees express a reluctance to discuss mental health openly, feeling that it could be seen as a weakness or failure to uphold familial perceptions.

Economic and social pressures

As living costs rise, younger members struggle to achieve the same economic stability as their parents, a gap exacerbated by community expectations to maintain high standards of living. Social pressures around marriage, education, and career choices can also feel restrictive, particularly for younger generations who may desire more independence. For women, these pressures are intensified by traditional gender roles that prioritize family responsibilities, making it challenging to balance professional ambitions with cultural norms.

Assimilation

Communal leaders described the community's intentional efforts to preserve its identity and maintain its cultural and religious traditions, particularly in the face of challenges posed by life in the United States. Community leaders highlighted tensions between the collective family-oriented values of the Persian Jewish

community and the individualism of American society. As Sol, a 55-year-old man said:

“Family starts with marriage, and marriage is not an easy institution. It takes sacrifice. You have to want it. You have to want to keep it. American society is very self-centered... very individualistic, and that's in conflict with family.”

These cultural shifts, along with intergenerational tensions, worried traditional leaders, who feared they might lose elements of their heritage. Some community leaders believe the community is assimilating at a very rapid pace and that there aren't enough institutional footholds supporting ethno-religious maintenance for the future.

Continuity and change

The Persian Jewish community's resilience over the decades reflects a commitment to continuity, yet it is also an evolving entity, influenced by generational shifts and social adaptation. Weekly Shabbat dinners, which serve as a cornerstone of Persian Jewish life, exemplify this continuity, providing a space for families to connect, reinforce their Jewish identity, and share updates within the community. Institutional continuity is supported by the community's philanthropic and advocacy organizations, which engage younger members and keep them connected to Jewish and Persian values.

However, evolving gender roles, educational opportunities, and professional aspirations are slowly reshaping the community. Many young Persian Jewish women are pursuing advanced degrees and ambitious careers, challenging older gender norms that emphasize early marriage and homemaking. This shift is indicative of broader societal changes, yet it raises questions within the community about how to balance independence with family commitments.

Generational differences are particularly evident in how individuals navigate their cultural identity. While older generations tend to emphasize ties to Iran and a sense of nostalgia for their homeland, younger members are more likely to adopt a hyphenated identity, proudly identifying as Persian Jews but also as Americans.

Interactions

ASHKENAZI INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURE

For Persian Jews in Los Angeles, engaging with Ashkenazi Jewish institutions is an ongoing process of cultural negotiation. Ashkenazi-dominated spaces, such as schools, synagogues, and Jewish community centers, often shape Jewish life in the United States, and Persian Jews have learned to navigate these institutions while maintaining their own traditions.

Despite these differences, Persian Jews are active participants in Ashkenazi institutions, though they often do so selectively. Many attend services at large synagogues like Sinai Temple but others rely on Persian synagogues like Nessah Synagogue, which offers a more culturally aligned experience. And while some Persian Jews have adopted Orthodox or Haredi practices, this trend is far less pronounced than in other Jewish communities in this report, with no significant community-wide trend toward religious conservatism.

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It's difficult for [Ashkenazim] to fathom this type of tightness of family or community.

The relationship between Persian and Ashkenazi Jews is further complicated by social assumptions and stereotypes that Persian Jews often encounter in Ashkenazi spaces. Some Persian Jews, like Charlotte, report feeling that Ashkenazi Jews view them through a lens of stereotypes, often associated with materialism and conservatism. One interviewee described how Ashkenazi Jews struggle to comprehend certain family dynamics within Persian life—such as the expectation to invite all 60 members of an extended family for Rosh Hashanah or Passover. As Shirin explained, “It's difficult for [Ashkenazim] to fathom this type of tightness of family or community.” Some interviewees noted that Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews seem to have an easier time appreciating and understanding the family-oriented traditions and general traditionalism that are central to Persian Jewish life.

OTHER SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI COMMUNITIES

While many Persian Jews recognize shared historical and culinary traditions with other Sephardic Jews, they tend to see themselves as culturally unique. This distinctiveness stems from the historical continuity of their community in Iran and the significant size of the Persian Jewish population in Los Angeles, which provides self-sufficiency in social matters. This allows Persian Jews to maintain their customs without fully assimilating into a broader Sephardic cultural groups.

However, Persian Jews interact and collaborate with other Sephardic Jews in specific spaces, such as synagogues and advocacy organizations, often finding com-

mon ground on identity and cultural representation. For example, many Persian Jews are heavily active in Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel, an institution originally focused on Jews of Spanish descent but now home to a significant Iranian Jewish presence. These interactions have fostered shared activity, communal overlap, and even intermarriage between Iranian and Iraqi Jews in Los Angeles.

Non-Jews from Iran

Persian Jews in Los Angeles share cultural roots, language, and certain traditions with non-Jewish Iranians, particularly around secular holidays like Nowruz (the Persian New Year). Los Angeles itself acts as a spatial strengthener of Persian culture, given the widespread presence of Iranian cultural landmarks and practices, both within and beyond the Jewish community. This visibility reinforces Persian Jewish identity while providing opportunities to preserve shared traditions. The City of Los Angeles officially designated “*Persian Square*” in Westwood in 2010, and Google Maps recognized “*Tehrangels*” in 2012, underscoring the cultural prominence and social integration of Iranians in LA. Walking through neighborhoods like Westwood, with Persian signs, bookstores, music shops, restaurants, and cafés, reflects a vibrant cultural ecosystem that both preserves and amplifies Persian heritage.

This shared culture serves as both a bridge and a boundary. On one hand, the common Persian language and familiar customs foster a sense of kinship and connection between different Iranians—Jews, Muslims and other religious groups such as Baha’i. On the other hand, lingering memories of antisemitic policies and discrimination under the Iranian regime create caution in these interactions. Many Persian Jews engage in cultural exchanges while maintaining religious boundaries, such as observing Shabbat and other Jewish traditions that distinguish their identity.

Over the past four decades, Persian Jews have played a pivotal role in preserving and promoting Iranian culture in Los Angeles. They have actively supported Iranian music, dance, and traditions through private celebrations like weddings, bar mitzvahs, and other events, hiring non-Jewish Iranian musicians to perform and keep these traditions alive. Persian Jewish families might also send their children to music schools to learn

traditional Persian instruments and melodies.

Persian Jews have also contributed significantly to Persian media and publications that shape the larger Iranian diaspora’s cultural discourse. They established Persian newspapers, radio shows, and TV programs, and institutions like *Sherkat-e-Ketab* in Westwood Blvd became global hubs for Persian literature before its closure in 2017.

For younger Persian Jews, there is often a stronger willingness to bridge gaps, particularly around shared heritage and political solidarity. Many have actively supported movements like *Women, Life, Freedom*, which advocates for women’s rights in Iran. As 41-year-old man Rafael reflects, “*It’s part of our cultural and political identity to support these movements.*”

NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- ➔ Unlike other groups in this report, Persian Jews have not experienced a large-scale shift toward Orthodox or Haredi practice
- ➔ LA sites such as “Tehrangels” and “Persian Square” reflect how embedded Iranian culture is in LA’s urban landscape
- ➔ Persian Jews helped build Iranian cultural infrastructure in LA

Distinctions

What is distinctive about this community compared to the other three?

Family-Centered Life With Integration Into Ashkenazi

Institutions: Persian Jews maintain strong family bonds while also integrating widely into Ashkenazi-led institutions, across multiple denominations.

Some (Though Limited) Interaction With Non-Jewish

Iranians: While Persian Jews and non-Jewish Iranians share a cultural heritage, their communities remain largely separate. Interaction is often limited to celebrating secular Iranian holidays, with younger generations having even less social overlap than older generations.

Comfort With Secularism and Multiple Denominations:

The Persian Jewish community has not experienced *en masse* the same broad shift toward religious conservatism or Haredi Orthodoxy seen in other groups in this study. Many continue to identify as secular.

Customs

1. **Playful Rituals During Passover:** During the *Dayenu* portion of the Passover *Haggadah*, Persian Jews lightly hit one another with scallions—symbolizing the whips of slavery in Egypt in a spirited and communal reenactment.

2. **Loudly Joyful Wedding Celebrations:** Unlike the solemn processions seen elsewhere, Persian brides and grooms walk down the aisle amidst lively music, cheers, and clapping.

POPULAR WORDS/ EXPRESSIONS

Aroos:

Bride or groom (depending on the context)

Yehoi:

An exclamation for surprise or “all of a sudden.”

Taarof:

A Persian cultural practice of politeness and hospitality—common among Persian Jews and others—often involving the host offering food and the guest declining, sometimes multiple times, as part of social etiquette.



FOODS OF THE PERSIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY



Gondi:

A Persian Jewish meatball made of ground chicken, chickpea flour, and spices, traditionally served in soup

Choresh:

A general term for Persian stews, often served with rice

Rice with Tahdig:

Persian-style rice cooked with a crispy bottom layer (tahdig), which can be made with potatoes, or plain rice

Bukharian Community Portrait (Queens)

SECTION 1.

Background

IMMIGRATION

Archeological evidence dates the existence of Central Asian Jewish communities to at least 1,100 years ago, though many community members believe that Central Asian Jewish communities had existed long before the Roman Exile. Over several centuries, as robust trade routes flourished between the Mediterranean and the Far East along the Silk Road, Jewish merchants and their families continued to migrate eastward and settle the region. The term “Bukharian” originated in the sixteenth century in

reference to the emirate of Bukhara, an area encompassing portions of what is now Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where Jewish communities settled in cities such as Samarkand, Tashkent, Dushanbe, Andijan, and Bukhara (a city that shares its name with the broader region). Though influenced over time by both Persian and Sephardic Jews, by the eighteenth century the Bukharian Jews were largely isolated from other Jews in the Middle East and Asia as a result of political, economic, and religious upheaval in the region.



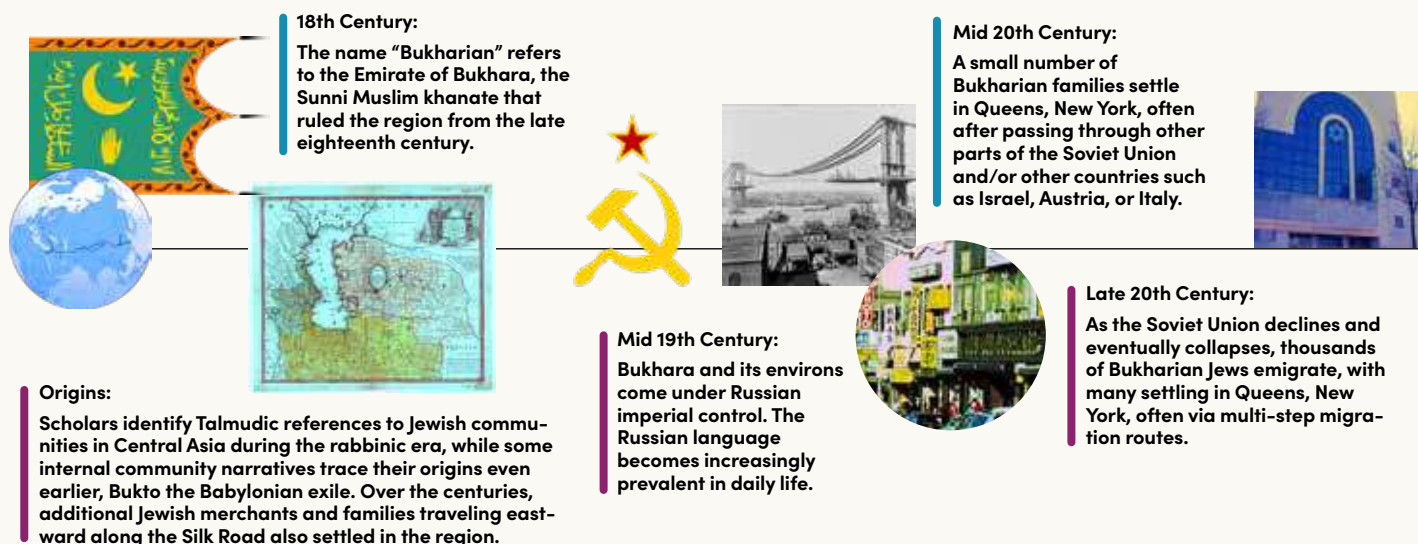
A Note on Terminology:

In general, Bukharian Jews self-identify as Bukharian, rather than using Sephardic or another pan-ethnic identity, emphasizing their unique history and customs. The community is nevertheless included in this study of Sephardic Jews because they exemplify a group that uses the term “Sephardic” to describe their legal, ritual, and liturgical practices. As one community member explained, even though Bukharian Jews do not originate from Spain, he felt comfortable using Sephardic because “we took the customs and the minhagim of the Shulhan Arukh.”

A Note on Spelling:

As of the early 21st century, community members have used the spelling “Bukharian.” Alternative, less frequently used spellings include “Bukharan” and “Bokharan.”

FROM BUKHARA TO QUEENS : Historical Highlights of the Queens Bukharian Community



The territory where Bukharians resided came under Russian control in the late nineteenth century, and the Russian language became increasingly prevalent in daily life, including among Bukharian Jews. When the USSR formed in the twentieth century, many Central Asian communities were not subject to the same religious restrictions found elsewhere in the Soviet Union, and the Bukharian community was able to retain its religious and ethnic identity throughout the Soviet regime.

Bukharians settled in the United States as early as the 1950s, although most came later. Community insiders describe immigration from the Soviet Union in two waves, a small one in the 1970s and a larger one from the late 1980s to early 1990s that coincided with the weakening and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Concerned with economic instability and antisemitism in emerging Central Asian nations, many Jews took the opportunity to leave once the borders of the former Soviet Union opened.

PLACES OF SETTLEMENT

The Bukharian families of the first immigration wave settled primarily in the neighborhoods of Forest Hills and Rego Park in Queens, New York. Immigrants who came to Queens after the fall of the Soviet Union joined the existing Bukharian community and began expanding outward to neighborhoods such as Kew Gardens, Kew Gardens Hills, Hillcrest, Jamaica Estates, Fresh Meadows, Briarwood, and Holliswood. As property values in Queens have continued to rise over the last decade or so, some Bukharians have opted to move to Long Island or outside of the New York Tri-State area altogether.

According to the UJA 2023 Community Study, an estimated 21,800 people—based on the upper range of their combined adult and child estimates—identify with Bukharian Jewish traditions or ancestry based on responses to the question, “Do you identify with any of the following ethnicities and traditions?”²⁵ This contrasts with estimates from Bukharian community leaders, who place the number closer to 75,000, within a global population of approximately 200,000. The true number likely falls somewhere in between, but pinpointing it remains a challenge.

Though beyond the focus of this demographic portrait, a sizeable Bukharian community lives in Brooklyn,



and smaller communities can be found in other regions of the United States, such as Phoenix and Atlanta.

LANGUAGES

Under Soviet rule, Russian was the primary language spoken among Bukharian Jews, and Russian is still spoken among many older members of the Bukharian community. Those who immigrated as children or who were born in the US often speak Russian with family, particularly with older relatives, or say they can understand Russian but have difficulty speaking, reading, or writing. Interviewees with young children sometimes send their toddlers to Russian-speaking daycare, but the language is not necessarily reinforced in the home.

Before immigrating, families from cities such as Bukhara, Samarkand, and Dushanbe spoke the Bukharian language, a form of Judeo-Persian inflected with Russian and Tajik influences and written with Hebrew letters in Rashi script. According to some interviewees, the Bukharian language was stigmatized as parochial, particularly in Tashkent and other more Russified cultural centers. Bukharians who immigrated when young or who were born in the US rarely know or speak the Bukharian language, though they often express a cultural affinity to it.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Educational and professional aspirations within the Bukharian community tend to reflect two visions of success. The first, what one interviewee called the

50,000 -75,000

While official data is limited, Bukharian community leaders in New York estimate that approximately 50,000 to 75,000 Bukharian Jews live in the NYC metro area, primarily in Queens. That ranks it as one of the largest Bukharian communities worldwide, second only to Israel.



RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

Most interviewees described religious observance along a continuum from “traditional” to “observant,” rather than within a denominational framework. Nearly all Bukharian Jews observe holidays, celebrate Shabbat in some form with family, and refrain from eating pork and other explicitly nonkosher animals in their homes. Refraining from driving or the use of electronics on Shabbat, or not eating at non-kosher restaurants, is more varied.

FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS

“risk-averse stream,” sees long-term economic stability as the primary aim. Parents impress upon their children the value of education, and expect that they will earn at least a bachelor’s degree, preferably in a field with real-world professional applications, such as computer science, engineering, and medicine; humanities and the social sciences are discouraged, unless they serve as stepping stones to professional paths such as law school.

The other, more “high-risk” vision of success is focused on fields such as real estate, jewelry, hairdressing, and a variety of other cash-based businesses. Interviewees suggest that men are more likely than woman to follow such career paths. Becoming a barber is a particularly popular career path for Bukharian men and is considered a way to earn a high salary in a relatively short amount of time. Manny, a 44-year-old businessman who immigrated to the United States in his teens, described his financial outlook as linked to concerns about antisemitism to:

“A lot of Bukharian men, we don’t have a profession. Our profession is to procure...to bring money home. You don’t know what’s gonna happen tomorrow. You don’t know if your house is gonna get burned because you’re Jewish. You don’t know if you’re gonna get robbed because...they’re looking at you because you’re Jewish.”

Although no objective statistics of poverty rates in the community are available, rabbis and other leaders in the community report many families struggle with unemployment and/or near-poverty income levels. A significant number of households, many with single mothers, are on food assistance and regularly receive food packages from charitable organizations.

The Bukharian community places a tremendous emphasis on the family as a unit. A typical household consists of a husband, wife, and multiple children, who tend to live with their parents until they get married in their early twenties and start families of their own. Most Bukharian undergraduates, especially young women, live at home and commute to college, though in recent years some have begun to live on college campuses. A growing portion of young Bukharians wait to marry until their mid to late twenties.

The community’s divorce rate has risen dramatically in the last few decades. Interviewees attribute this change to a range of factors, mostly related to shifting ideas about relationships and marriage. Women who in the past may have been entirely reliant on their husbands for income now have greater access to higher education and the financial resources to leave unhappy marriages. A few interviewees also suggested that wives now expect marriage to be a partnership, and they are less likely to tolerate patriarchal attitudes of marriage originating in the cultural norms of Central Asia.

COMMUNAL INSTITUTIONS

Religious institutions such as synagogues, schools, and ritual baths, and food-related establishments such as restaurants, supermarkets, and butchers, comprise the major communal institutions and organizations. Some interviewees mentioned local businesses, cultural institutions, or social services by name, but most spoke in overarching categories such as “synagogues” or “businesses.”

Identities

SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI

Most interviewees identified first and foremost as Bukharian, and many were dismissive of using Sephardic or Mizrahi identifiers, explaining that these terms were not used in Bukharian communities prior to immigration. As one American-born interviewee remarked,

“If you had asked the prior generation, like my grandfather, for example, how he identified himself—Sephardic or Mizrahi—he would have said neither. He would have said we are Bukharian. This whole Sephardic thing...There was no such label.”

When pressed to choose, though, Bukharian Jews are more likely to lean toward Sephardic over Mizrahi for two main reasons. First, Sephardic is a more familiar term in the Jewish-American context, often used broadly as a counterpoint to Ashkenazi. Second, Sephardic refers to religious practice, particularly the liturgical and halakhic influences of Sephardic rabbis who visited the region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For those whose religious observance is central to their identity, these Sephardic traditions form a key part of how they understand themselves as observant Jews. Some Bukharian interviewees acknowledged that Sephardic may not technically apply to them, given its association with Jews of Spanish origin, and they mentioned hearing Mizrahi as a potentially more accurate category.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

The Bukharian community is distinctive among subgroups in the broader Sephardic umbrella in that they identify not with a contemporary geographic country of origin, but rather as an ethno-religious group rooted

in a nostalgic geographic region. The term “Bukhara” recalls the bygone Central Asian emirate in which Jewish communities were allowed to settle. According to the interviewees, inherent in the label “Bukharian” is the religious designation “Jewish.” Surrounding neighbors who identified as Uzbek, Tajik, or Kazakh were all understood to be Muslim. A Jew from Uzbekistan, for instance, was never an Uzbeki Jew, which was considered a contradiction in terms; an Uzbek was Muslim and a Bukharian was Jewish. Although Muslims from the city of Bukhara might refer to themselves as Bukharan, the Bukharian Jewish community uses the term Bukharian to refer exclusively to Jews. The Soviet government reinforced this distinction by officially listing *Jewish* as a separate ethnic identity on internal documents and passports, further setting Bukharian Jews apart from their non-Jewish neighbors.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Interviewees expressed confusion over where they fit into the American frameworks of race and ethnicity. Most debated whether to identify as white or other.

“I’ve always had trouble identifying as what is it that I am,” said Elizabeth, an immigrant in her 30s. “I pick white, but I feel white is more like...European white. It’s not like I’m black, Native American, Hispanic...So I would always put white.”

Interviewees also expressed confusion about whether or not they are considered Asian according to American standards. Robert, who immigrated from Central Asia in his early teens, recalled the pushback he received from his American-born peers when he described himself as Asian:

“Basically what they’re trying to say is if you don’t look a certain way and if you’re not from East Asia, you’re not Asian. So that was really an interesting wake-up moment...These categories, they really frustrate me...and they frustrate many of us who are from West Asia and Central Asia...”

JEWES OF COLOR

With one exception, Bukharian interviewees did not use the term JOC to self-identify, and many were unfamiliar with the term until it was raised during the interview process. Most initially associated it with Jews who are black. Others found the term irrelevant, noting that Bukharian Jews do not present a uniform appearance and do not define themselves by skin color. As Pinchas, a 48-year-old immigrant, explained,

“In the Bukharian community, there are different skin colors of people. There are blonde people, there are white people, there are dark-skinned people, very dark-skinned people. And we still consider [ourselves] as one group. We don’t consider [ourselves] as black or white or anything, just Bukharian.”

While they generally do not use the term themselves, some interviewees expressed no objection to it being assigned to them.

JEWISH DENOMINATIONS

Like many Sephardic and Mizrahi American Jews, Bukharian Jews generally do not use denominational

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We don’t consider [ourselves] as black or white or anything, just Bukharian.

frameworks, and community members with varying levels of observance will sit together at the same prayer services. Some interviewees described their traditions as being “Orthodox” with respect to gender norms and rituals, with male-only clergy and separate seating for men and women in synagogues. Many of the interviewees describe an ongoing “rightward” religious shift in the community as members learn more about the minutiae of Jewish observance and become influenced by Orthodox Jews in nearby Ashkenazi communities. People in this category increasingly send their children to Jewish day schools that were established by and for Orthodox Ashkenazim. The abundance of kiruv (outreach) organizations and Orthodox rabbinical leaders operating within and around the Bukharian community have contributed to this religious shift, and have created familial and communal rifts between older, more traditional Bukharians, and younger generations increasingly adopting the markers of Ashkenazi Orthodoxy.



Community

MAJOR COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

Religious institutions are the major organizations in the Bukharian community. The Bukharian Jewish Community Center (BJCC) was built in Forest Hills to serve as a central hub for the Bukharian community. Its five floors currently house a synagogue, meeting spaces for local community leaders, a social hall, and the offices of the community *beit din* [Heb: Jewish rabbinical court] and the *Bukharian Times*, a Russian-language newspaper published by and for the Bukharian community. The BJCC also houses the local branch of the Bukharan Jewish Congress, an international organization that unites Bukharian communities throughout the world.

Beth Gavriel Bukharian Congregation is probably the most prominent synagogue in the community, featuring daily prayer services, Torah classes, a *mikveh* [Heb: ritual bath], and an associated day school. Other schools include The Jewish Institute of Queens, a Bukharian-run Jewish day school originally founded to acculturate immigrants to religious Jewish life in America, and Shaarei Tzion, a Bukharian K-8 school that serves families who

want a more religiously observant environment. Many other synagogues and day schools serve the community.

In addition to synagogues and day schools, other community institutions include kiruv (outreach) organizations that seek to provide religious education to community members. Chazaq, an organization started by and for Bukharians, provides educational and cultural programming to Jewish families beyond the Bukharian community. Multiple Bukharian-run food pantries are open to anyone in need. Yesodot, founded by members of the community, provides outpatient counseling and other mental health services to community members who might otherwise not seek help from communal outsiders. At the community's social core is a robust system of kosher restaurants and social halls designed to support the frequency, size, and scope of Bukharian celebrations and memorials. Lastly, Bukharian newspapers, magazines, and online networking groups provide community members with shared stories and opportunities for connection.

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When one falls, everyone helps. No one is left behind. You will never see a Bukharian homeless guy.

MORAL FRAMEWORKS

Family

The most common descriptors interviewees provided about their community were “tight-knit” and “family-oriented,” and much of community members’ interactions and worldview are through the lens of family, with deep attachments to close relatives, as well as an affinity to the Bukharian community more broadly. Bukharian Jews in Queens see themselves a part of a sprawling international extended family, with connections to Bukharians in other parts of the United States, Canada, Israel, Austria, and beyond.

It was common for new Bukharian immigrants to live in apartments and/or houses near other family members, often in multi-generational homes. For many in the community today, living in close proximity to immediate family is still both an expectation and a priority. Family members are intimately involved in one another's lives and one another's spaces across life stages. It is customary for children to remain in their parents' homes until marriage in their early to mid 20s. Caregiving for elderly parents is an expected way of demonstrating honor and gratitude; refusing to take in one's elderly parents can be seen as a shameful sign of disrespect.

Community members see one another as family members to support and protect. Elisheva, a 46-year-old immigrant, said,

"What I like about the community, if somebody has a funeral, everybody would come support you. Somebody has a wedding, everybody would come support you...Everybody comes to each other's aid in the moment of need."

Manny explained,

"We are very, very tight-knit. When one falls, everyone helps. No one is left behind. You will never see a Bukharian homeless guy...It's like a big herd. And if one of them falls behind, the whole herd will surround him and pick him up so the wolves won't get him."



Another interviewee, 42-year-old Bobby, acknowledged that outsiders might not understand this fierce need to protect one another:

"If you bother one of us, you're bothering all of us. And to an American, he would feel like, oh, they're a gang...No, they're defending [each other]."

An additional element of family life is the interdependent reputations of family members, with everyone in a family serving as a representative for their immediate and extended family members as well. Members of a "good family," for example, are desirable marriage prospects, whereas one "bad egg" can "taint" the family's other members. A 53-year-old community rabbi saw this as a positive mechanism for ensuring community members behave in accordance with communal norms:

"One of the things I tell for myself personally, the more people that know me, I feel safe, 'cause I'm afraid to do something wrong. People will say, Oh, my God. What is that rabbi doing?...You understand that that's the whole idea...It keeps you in check...You want that."

Hospitality and hosting also lie at the heart of a "good family." Bukharians take great pride in their homes, and invest time and money into furnishings and finishes to create the best possible experience for their guests.

Gender expectations

According to most of the interviewees, the Bukharian community has long adhered to traditional gender roles, as is typical of many groups from the Muslim world. Men have been expected to provide for the family and function as the head of the household to whom all decisions are deferred. Women have been expected to remain "pure" until marriage, at which point they dedicate themselves to their families and households, in addition to other responsibilities they may have, professional or otherwise.

In the years following the immigration of many Bukharian families to the United States, Bukharian women who sought higher education and professions were still expected to carry out their traditional responsibilities as homemakers. In many households, boys and

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I think that the country's woke-ism is poisonous...It's just gonna bring everything down.

girls are still raised according to these expectations. Yet many younger Bukharians, particularly women, increasingly expect that husbands will take on a share of the housework, which can present competing viewpoints about how future Bukharian families should function.

Zionism and politics

The Bukharian community is deeply Zionist. Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, huge swaths of Central Asian Jews made their way to Israel, where an earlier wave of Bukharian immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries had already established a Bukharian-Israeli community. Jerusalem's Bukharan Quarter was built in 1890. In the United States, most members of the Bukharian community have close ties to relatives in Israel and feel interpersonally connected to and responsible for them. In the wake of October 7, 2023, many interviewees said, the community came together to fundraise and advocate for Israel, one issue on which most Bukharians find common ground.

With some exceptions, mostly among younger Bukharians born in the US, the community is very conservative politically. Some interviewees trace this to the community's experience in the Soviet Union.

“Your parents come here and they're being told that where we came from is completely wrong. It's communist,”

said Yvanna, a 40-year-old immigrant who considers herself more politically progressive than most of her relatives.

“And so we have to do everything we can...to prove that we're not communist, we're the opposite.”

The community has become increasingly Republican in recent years, particularly with the rise of Trumpian populism and the fear of woke leftism. Many community members, however, do not vote in local elections, and a significant number refuse to register to vote altogether so they can avoid jury duty.

Although the interviewees did not explicitly discuss DEI by name, social and political attitudes among the interviewees reveal their attitudes toward this topic. In recent years, an increasing number of Bukharian parents have been taking their children out of the local public schools and enrolling them in yeshivot, not only due to religious and cultural motivations but also out of concern that New York City public schools are promoting a “woke agenda.” Steeped in traditional gender roles, community members as a whole reject policies around gender identity and gender fluidity. Said Shira, an American-born 36-year-old,

“I think that the country's woke-ism is poisonous... It's just gonna bring everything down.”





BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING

Because of the relatively small size of this community compared to other Sephardic communities, especially within the American Jewish community as a whole, and due to a general lack of awareness of the geopolitics of Central Asia, most Americans have little to no understanding of who Bukharians are. Most of the interviewees for this study, while very proud of their Bukharian heritage, are reluctant to describe it to most outsiders.

When asked to describe what makes someone a member of the Bukharian community, most interviewees gave geographic and/or historical descriptions: Bukharians are Jews who originated in Central Asia, speak Russian, and kept their Judaism. Many of the interviewees also relied on what seems like tautological logic. Bukharian “insiders” are those who participate in community events, keep Bukharian traditions, and behave according to Bukharian values. In other words, what makes someone a member of this community is that one acts like a member, and one who acts like a member of the community

is accepted as a member. Even for interviewees who married outside of the community and/or purposefully moved away, doing “Bukharian things” makes them “feel Bukharian.” Said said 32-year-old Penny, who whose husband is Ashkenazi,

“I’m a little bit inside [the Bukharian community], just a little bit...I’m part of the family by going to family functions...All the traditions, weddings, and bar mitzvahs...I feel like that’s where my ‘Bukharian’ shows.”

Interviewees who at times have felt like outsiders attributed their experiences to behaviors that were deemed “un-Bukharian”: Molly, a 26-year-old born in America, said friends from high school told her,

“Oh, you were never really part of our Bukharian group.’ Why? Because I did after-school activities...and I wanted to sit in the lunch room [with the non-Bukharian kids]...”

“

I feel like the financial status is what's making it more difficult to stay within the community...I sometimes don't fit in because everybody is throwing all of these weddings and parties ... and I'm like, here I am and I can't even throw a normal birthday party.

For Molly's Bukharian friends, being part of the Bukharian group meant socializing exclusively with other Bukharians and not participating in activities outside the scope of what Bukharians are "supposed to do." In extreme cases, behaviors considered too unacceptable within the community can irrevocably brand individuals and/or their families as outsiders. Dating and marrying non-Jews presents a hard boundary that will exclude Bukharians from family and communal life.

Other behaviors can also lead to social barriers and exclusion. For a subset of community members who have become more religiously observant, having children who have religiously "regressed" can cause communal shame. Lena, a 43-year-old educator, said:

"When we become religious and one of our kids goes backward, it's crazy in the community...It's an embarrassment... people ask us, 'How could you let this? It's the parents' fault. How can you allow this?'"

An interviewee who works with community members suffering from opioid addiction said,

"If there's an addict in the family, then it's a bad family automatically, they're bad parents, bad siblings, people shouldn't marry the siblings of the addict."

One interviewee who identifies as politically progressive has learned to keep his political opinions to himself or risk alienating huge swaths of his close and extended family.

COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

Cost of living

Older community members express concern about New York City's skyrocketing housing prices, as Bukharian families find it increasingly difficult to buy homes clustered together in Queens. Given the freedom of mobility offered to Jews in the United States, geographic closeness becomes an even more potent mechanism for communal sustainability, and distance can put this communal sustainability at risk.

Aside from housing prices, the cost of living in the community can be challenging for many of its members. In keeping with cultural emphases on hospitality and bringing family together, many Bukharians recognize major milestones such as gender reveals, Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, and weddings with elaborate parties for extended family and friends. In lieu of buying the host a gift, guests are expected to share in the cost of the party itself and to reciprocate by throwing elaborate parties of their own or risk being socially excluded. Deena, a 40-year-old teacher, said,

"I feel like the financial status is what's making it more difficult to stay within the community...Even myself, I sometimes don't fit in because everybody is throwing all of these weddings and parties and events and it's costing them thousands of dollars, and I'm like, here I am and I can't even throw a normal birthday party."

Mental health, abuse, and addiction

Because Bukharian families often face immense pressure to preserve their reputation as a "good family," they tend to keep potentially stigmatizing family matters, such as mental health disorders, marital issues, or addiction, private. Seeking professional help

or guidance is tantamount to broadcasting that the family has a problem. To paraphrase 27-year-old David, a Bukharian home in trouble is like a house on fire: Everyone in the community can see that the house is on fire, but rather than throwing water onto the flames, the neighbors distance themselves from the home so they won't breathe in smoke from standing too close. Some interviewees shared personal and second-hand accounts of domestic abuse that were never discussed inside or outside of the home and were therefore never addressed. Mental health professionals and social workers in the community are working to normalize therapy and other treatment options.

A number of interviewees said the focus on a family's reputation can have negative effects, including a tendency to "sweep things under the rug." As Violet, a 26-year-old woman who left the community, explained,

"If any situation happens internally, inside the house, you don't talk about it outside, you pretend like everything is fine, you smile, you say you have the best family ever. You don't go to other people about your problems... This is not something you share with a psychologist. This is our family thing and we'll resolve it within the family. But nothing actually gets resolved, it just gets swept away under the rug."

Continuity and change

As the immigrant generation ages and the Bukharian community becomes more Americanized, some of the older interviewees fear the erosion of "traditional" Bukharian family values that shaped their lives in Central Asia. Pinchas said nostalgically that as family units become more diffuse and modern, the community is losing its links to the wisdom of earlier generations:

"Here in America, it's different. You have to marry, you have to get an apartment. And mama, papa don't involve yourself in our family, don't tell us what to do... We don't have grandparents living in the same houses with children. So there is a breaking line there. The family breaks. The structure of the family is different."

For some community members, religiosity is a bulwark against losing Bukharian identity. Boaz, a 64-year-old immigrant, explained that in Central Asia, Bukharians were automatically distinct from the surrounding Muslim communities, but in the American context, the community needs to differentiate itself from its secular environment by developing a religious lifestyle that incorporates religious stringencies common among American Orthodox Jews but rarely practiced in the Soviet Union. Other community members, though, like 33-year-old Benny, view the community's slide to the religious right less positively:

"Unfortunately, in America, I think they're using religion and trying to get closer to religion as... a safe space for them to not lose their identity as Bukharians. But I feel like we're becoming way too more religious at an alarming rate and less open to new ideas and to change and to different things here in America."



RELIGIOSITY HAS BECOME BOTH A SHIELD AND A SIGNAL

As traditional family structures shift in the American context, some Bukharians embrace stricter religious observance to preserve communal identity—though others worry it's closing the community off to change

Interactions

ASHKENAZI INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURE

Following their arrival in the United States, Bukharian immigrants relied on existing Jewish organizations developed by Ashkenazi communities—for example, the UJA Federation of New York, New York Association for New Americans (NYANA), and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)—for housing, furniture, and other forms of financial assistance. Interviewees recall a mixed set of responses to this support. Many interviewees expressed immense gratitude for the assistance of the American Jewish community, yet they simultaneously recalled condescension, particularly among the New York Orthodox community. One 63-year-old community rabbi described how Bukharians learned to navigate the more complex religious minutiae that much of the Ashkenazi Orthodox community accepts as a matter of course:

“We were introduced to 17 kinds of kosher...We used to go to the butcher and used to say, this meat is kosher and this meat is not kosher. It was very simple. Over here you come and there is three or four supervisions, and each one says what is good and what is not good...This was messed up for us.”

Traditional Bukharians who had been proud of their religious lifestyle in Central Asia were made to feel that they were not knowledgeable Jews. In recent years, some community members have turned to Chabad to help them retain and further develop their religious identities.

As the Bukharian community has established more synagogues, schools, restaurants, and mikvehs, they have become less reliant on Ashkenazi institutions. Nonetheless, many religiously observant Bukharian parents opt to send their children to Ashkenazi-run schools. As a 36-year-old mother of four young children put it,

“We trust the Ashkenazim more with the education process...They’ve been around longer and they know what they’re doing...The Sephardic schools are newer. I’m not experimenting on my kid. Let them experiment...My grandkids can go there if it becomes a good school.”

OTHER SEPHARDIC/MIZRAHI COMMUNITIES

Most of the interviewees bristled at the idea of making comparisons between different Sephardic communities, preferring to think of everyone as Jews. Some younger interviewees expressed affinity for other Sephardic communities, especially those that originated in traditional Muslim cultures. However, a few interviewees described what they view as other Sephardim holding Bukharians in low esteem. One 32-year-old woman, who eventually married an Ashkenazi man, described dates she went on with non-Bukharian Sephardim:

“

We were introduced to 17 kinds of kosher... We used to go to the butcher and used to say, this meat is kosher and this meat is not kosher. It was very simple.

“

In Russia, we were called Jews, not lovingly, with hatred. When I came to this country, they called me Russian. I said, I resent that. I'm a Jew from Russia.

"I dodged a bullet because their Sephardic [community] was not very accepting of Bukharians...There's a general feeling of other Sephardis that they could be more superior to other Sephardis...some people think they're better than others."

NON-JEWS FROM CENTRAL ASIA

Interviewees who came of age in the Soviet Union and emigrated as adults described mostly congenial relationships with their non-Jewish neighbors in Central Asia:

"We had to find ways to coexist with Muslim people... There were many ethnic groups that lived in Central Asia... We had to learn to be with them. We learned their languages, their culture."

In New York, older Bukharians feel a cultural affinity with Uzbek and Tajik immigrants in Queens, many of whom immigrated to the United States alongside their Bukharian Jewish neighbors. According to one community rabbi,

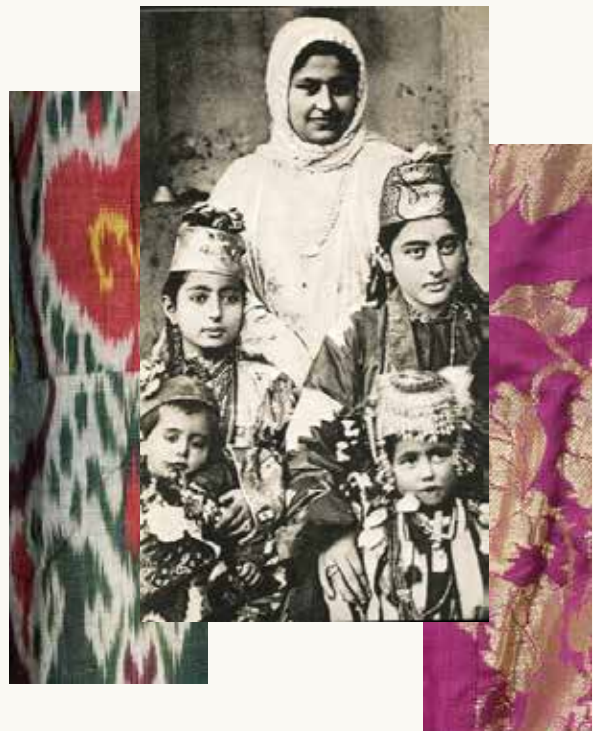
"A lot of the Muslims coming now to New York, they come into the Jewish neighborhood... They're running their weddings in our glatt kosher halls because they feel close, the culture and everything, and because they eat kosher meat too, the halal meat... We respect that we are not religious the same, but it doesn't mean that we cannot be friends."

NON-JEWISH SOCIETY AND INSTITUTIONS

Because Bukharian history and identity do not neatly align with American society's racial and ethnic categories, Bukharians have had to reconceptualize themselves after immigrating from Central Asia. An interviewee in his 60s recalled the jarring interaction he had with non-Jews upon his arrival to New York:

"In Russia, we were called Jews, not lovingly, with hatred. When I came to this country, they called me Russian. I said, I resent that. I'm a Jew from Russia. They didn't get it. You're Russian or you're American."²⁶

Since most Americans are unfamiliar with the Bukharian community, the interviewees report experiencing very little anti-Bukharian discrimination from non-Jews. Although many are concerned about the uptick in American antisemitism in general, Bukharians experience antisemitism as members of the broader American Jewish community rather than specifically as part of the Bukharian community.



Distinctions

What is distinctive about this community compared to the other three?

The Bukharian community is distinct in its reliance on frequent gatherings of extended family and friends as a means of holding the community together. The community's unique sociopolitical and linguistic history also distinguishes it from the other communities described in this report.

A distinct Jewish identity in Central Asia

Unlike other Sephardic and Mizrahi groups who strongly identify with their countries of origin (such as Syria, Iran, or Morocco), Bukharian Jews do not identify as Uzbeki or Tajiki. In Central Asia, national identity is often tied to Muslim religious identity, making these labels incompatible with Jewish identity. Instead, for Bukharian Jews, being Bukharian inherently means being Jewish—the term itself carries both ethnic and religious meaning. This distinguishes them from other Jewish communities that align more closely with the broader national identities of their home countries.

Between Russian and Bukharian identity in the US

Though Bukharian Jews speak Russian, they do not consider themselves ethnically or culturally Russian. In their Soviet-era homelands, “Russian” referred to non-Jewish Europeans, and “Russian Jews” typically described Ashkenazi Jews from European parts of the USSR. However, upon arriving in the US, many Bukharian Jews were mistakenly labeled as Russian,

even by well-meaning American Jews and non-Jews. While some accept this identifier for the sake of simplicity, others find it misleading. Despite these distinctions, Bukharian and Russian Jews share cultural and linguistic connections, which create bonds between the communities, even as their religious traditions remain quite different.



FOODS OF THE BUKHARIAN JEWISH COMMUNITY



Bakhsh/baxsh:

This green dish of rice, meat, and herbs is exclusive to the Bukharian community. This traditional food is often served on Shabbat.

Lepyoshka/Bukharian non:

This Bukharian take on a classic Uzbek flatbread was originally cooked along the sides of a tandoor. Many Bukharians use this bread to make the hamotzi blessing at the Shabbat table.



Chalpak:

These soft sheets of fried dough are a staple of yushvos, large annual gatherings to commemorate the passing of a loved one.

Parties as communal continuity and cohesion mechanisms

Bukharian Jews in the United States have developed a distinctive communal infrastructure centered around restaurants, wedding halls, and event spaces, which function as both social hubs and mechanisms for communal continuity. These spaces serve as gathering points where Bukharian traditions, food, and music reinforce cultural identity. Memorial gatherings known as yushvos are held annually for deceased relatives, often spanning multiple generations, with family members convening at community restaurants to commemorate their loved ones. Celebrations—particularly weddings and milestone events—are an essential component of Bukharian communal life, with significant investment in physical infrastructure to accommodate their frequency and scale. These gatherings operate within an established financial system, where guests contribute monetary gifts in envelopes rather than bringing physical gifts. As these celebrations have become increasingly elaborate and expensive, the financial burden of participation has grown, with some community members feeling social pressure to contribute even when it is unsustainable. Despite these tensions, the expectation of participation in both communal events and financial reciprocity remains a defining feature of Bukharian social life.

Customs

Kosh-Chinon: This ceremony is held a few days before a wedding, in which a bride's eyebrows and facial hair are plucked for the first time. The mirror she uses to view her "clean" face is kept as a memento. Although in the United States women do not typically wait until marriage to remove their facial hair, they may still hold the ceremony nevertheless.

Festive Wedding Attire and Ceremonies: Many young couples will wear a jomah, a colorful ceremonial robe, at their wedding to signal the close of the festivities. The couple and their immediate family wear these colorful robes while dancing to traditional Bukharian music.

POPULAR WORDS/ EXPRESSIONS

Boshet Salomat:
"Bless you" / "To your health"

Hudo Beshkur:
"Thank God"

Hudo Hat:
"God willing"



KOSH - CHINON : A PRE - WEDDING RITE

In this traditional Bukharian ceremony, a bride's eyebrows and facial hair are plucked for the first time just days before her wedding. The mirror she uses is saved as a keepsake. While American Bukharian women often remove facial hair earlier in life, many still honor the ritual as a cultural gesture.

Latin Sephardic Community Portrait (South Florida)

SECTION 1.

Background

This portrait differs from the other three in that it does not focus on a single ethnic community structured around a shared neighborhood. Instead, we identified South Florida as a dynamic and evolving population hub characterized by a significant Sephardic presence, a large Latin Jewish population, and a notable population of Latin Sephardic Jews. By including this population hub, we aimed to explore the unique ways Sephardic communities have been shaped—and shape—post-1965 Jewish immigration to the US.

IMMIGRATION

For the Latin Sephardic Jews in this portrait, South Florida represents the latest stop in a migration journey spanning generations and continents.

Beginning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Jews from the Middle East and North Africa migrated to Latin America in search of better economic opportunities. Spanish-speaking Jews from areas of Morocco that were colonized by Spain found Latin American countries particularly attractive. Middle Eastern and North African immigrants and their descendants established small but cohesive Sephardic communities across Latin America, preserving their cultural and religious traditions while adapting to their new host societies.



A Note on the Choice of “Latin”

There are many terms that participants in our interviews used to describe themselves, including Latino, Hispanic, Latin American, Latin Sephardic, Latino Sephardic, Sephardic, Mexican, Argentinian, Syrian, Colombian Sephardic, among others. After considerable deliberations, the research team decided on the term Latin Sephardic for this portrait because it is the one term most often used by Sephardic immigrants in Miami to describe themselves, and because it connotes some origin in Latin America but is inclusive of second-generation immigrants from those countries as well. None of our interviewees used the term Latinx to self-identify.

Please note:

Brazilians are not represented in this study because they do not have a shared language with most of the Latin Sephardic Jews in the area. While Brazilians may participate in Jewish community events and religious and spiritual gatherings, when participants for this study were asked about interactions with other Latin Sephardic groups, they did not mention Brazilian Jews.

The second half of the 20th century saw two significant migration trajectories. Rising Arab nationalist movements, often accompanied by anti-Jewish sentiment, drove many Jews to leave or flee their homes in the Middle East and North Africa in the decades following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, with many settling in Latin America. Meanwhile, political upheavals in Latin America prompted Jewish migration to the US—most notably Cuba’s 1959 revolution, which sparked a distinct wave of Jewish immigration. They were followed by additional waves of migration in the 1980s and beyond, as economic crises and political instability in countries such as Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, and Mexico spurred further movement to the US, particularly South Florida.

These successive migrations reflect a continuous search for stability, community, and economic opportunity, alongside a steadfast commitment to preserving Sephardic identity across new and evolving diasporas.

PLACES OF SETTLEMENT

Cuban Jews who arrived after the 1959 revolution primarily settled in Miami Beach, where Sephardic immigrants—many with family origins in Turkey—established Temple Moses Sephardic Congregation of Miami.

MULTI-STEP MIGRATION PATHS OF LATIN SEPHARDIC JEWS IN SOUTH FLORIDA



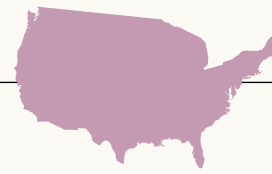
Late 19th–Early 20th Centuries:

Jews from the Middle East and North Africa migrate to Latin American countries—such as Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil—seeking economic opportunity and fleeing Ottoman decline.



Mid-20th Century:

Following Israel's founding in 1948, Jews from MENA flee anti-Jewish persecution. While most settle in Israel or France, some migrate to Latin America. Later, political unrest in parts of Latin America prompts Jewish emigration to the US.



Late 20th Century–Present:

Latin Sephardic Jews continue to immigrate to the United States in response to economic crises, rising insecurity, and political instability

Ashkenazi Jewish immigrants from Cuba also founded their own synagogue, the Cuban Hebrew Congregation. While many of the children and grandchildren of these immigrants have since assimilated into the larger American Jewish community and moved away from Miami Beach, older immigrants remain and continue to participate in synagogue services and activities.

Beginning in the 1980s, Sephardic Jews from other Latin American countries, driven by political and economic crises, began immigrating to South Florida. They initially settled farther north along Miami Beach and later gravitated toward Aventura, a small city in northeastern Miami-Dade County. Aventura's increasing popularity has made it a more expensive place to live, prompting newer immigrants to seek more affordable housing farther north in Hollywood, Weston, and other parts of Broward County.

LANGUAGES

Most Latin Sephardic Jews speak Spanish at home. Younger generations who immigrated at an early age or were born in the US are more likely to favor English, though they often continue speaking Spanish with parents and other family members. Among older generations, there is limited use of Haketia—a Judeo-Spanish dialect originating in Northern Morocco—among Moroccan Jews, and Arabic among Syrian Jews. Turkish Jews, meanwhile, recall their grandparents speaking Ladino. The occasional use of phrases or words in these languages serve as an important link to the history of Sephardic migration. South Florida, as a hub for Latin American immigrants more broadly, provides an environment that strengthens the preservation of Spanish

within the community. In recent years, some Latin Sephardic Jews have shown renewed interest in learning ancestral languages (Ladino, Haketia) more fully as a way to reconnect with their heritage.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Education

A large majority of Latin Sephardic Jews are highly educated, particularly those who came to the US as adults. They studied medicine, business, architecture, or computer science in their home countries or in the US. Many children who arrived before adolescence, as well as children born in the US, have attended American universities, either locally or in other states. Universities with large Jewish populations or Jewish universities, such as Yeshiva University in New York, are particularly popular among Latin Sephardic students studying away from home.

Occupations

Many Latin Sephardic immigrants work as entrepreneurs in real estate, small manufacturing, or import/export businesses. For some, these are business enterprises that originated in their home countries and continue to operate there, managed through a combination of remote work, domestic partners, and frequent travel to Latin America. Others have invested in the growing Miami real estate market or work as realtors within the market. Younger members of the community are more likely to be engaged in tech start-ups, computer programming, and software development, or in the medical supplies and infrastructure trades. Still others work as doctors, professors, or lawyers.



While older Latin Sephardic Jews recall intergenerational households during their youth, this is less common today.

Financial resources

A majority of the Latin Sephardic immigrants in this study can be classified as middle- and upper-middle-class. Many own homes in gated communities, close to synagogues and Jewish day schools. Some had purchased second homes in Miami for vacations or as investments while living in Latin America and were able to settle into them quickly, while others had investments outside of Latin America that they were able to tap into upon migration. Other Sephardic immigrants, however, have found themselves in precarious financial situations. Many Jewish families who left Argentina after the 2001 economic collapse, for example, had few resources and turned to local synagogues for help, often struggling for years until they achieved financial security. Today, some members of the Latin Sephardic community are unemployed and seeking work, while others rely on community assistance in the form of food and cash aid, though this is a minority of the population.

Religious observance

Like many Sephardic Jews, Latin Sephardic Jews tend to describe their religious observance as traditional, in which Judaism and faith are central to their lives and identity but religious practices are flexible and varied. For example, traditionalism may mean strict adherence to kosher dietary laws in and out of the home for some community members while others may simply eat kosher-style (i.e., no pork, shellfish, or mixing of meat and dairy). Still others may not follow any Jewish dietary laws but host a family Shabbat dinner every Friday without fail.

In recent years, many Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida have shifted closer to Orthodoxy. One respondent recalled that Shabbat dinners used to end early enough

for adolescents to go out to clubs or local restaurants. This is less common in his neighborhood today, as people tend to stay in and observe the entirety of Shabbat. In keeping with this trend, Aventura and the surrounding region have experienced a growth in institutions serving observant Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews, such as kosher supermarkets and restaurants, mikvehs (ritual bathing houses), educational facilities, and houses of worship.

FAMILY/HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION

Latin Sephardic households resemble American-born Jewish ones in many ways. Children typically live at home until college and sometimes return after university until they gain financial independence or get married. Some students remain local, moving out only when they can afford to or when they marry. Among the participants in this study, there were no reports of unmarried couples cohabiting. While older Latin Sephardic Jews recall intergenerational households during their youth, this is less common today.

MAJOR COMMUNAL ORGANIZATIONS AND INSTITUTIONS

Jewish immigrants from Latin America bring with them a tradition of deep communal involvement across many Jewish and Sephardic institutions—including community centers, Jewish day schools, Zionist movements, athletic and cultural institutions, and synagogues—motivated in part by inconsistent state support for social and educational programs.

In South Florida, Latin Sephardic Jewish life is most likely to be centered around the synagogue, and today the Latin Jewish community is served by many of the existing Sephardic synagogues. While these institutions serve Sephardic Jews from diverse countries of origin, the density of the Latin Sephardic population results in an over-representation of Latin Sephardic Jews. Synagogues in particular are an entry point for immigrants assimilating into their new communities. Other community institutions—including the Jewish Federation, day schools, and community centers—also seek to serve the growing Latin Jewish community within their broader communal framework.

Identities

SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI

For many Latin Sephardic Jews, Sephardic identity is built on culture and customs passed down across generations and continents and re-imagined in new lands. Strong familial ties to cultural homelands (both real and imagined) in Spain, Morocco, Syria, and Turkey are pillars upon which Sephardic Jews build their identities. A connection to “Sephardic” identity is especially important due to the ways in which Jews from Spain and Morocco formed a Sephardic diaspora across Latin America. Additionally, Sephardic identity manifests in foods, language, and folkways, but also in values and norms. Strong family values, traditional gender roles, maintenance of familial ties, and involvement in communities all form part of how Sephardic Jews understand their cultural identity.

Latin Jews of MENA background that we interviewed do not use the term Mizrahi to identify themselves. For many, Mizrahi is a category that recalls an Israeli system of ethnic classification, based on regional origin or, according to some, physical attributes, but it does not translate into Latin American-based ethnic categories. As Jacob, a 33-year-old man of Syrian descent who was born in Argentina, reported,

“Mizrahi, no, we don’t use that term, but I know some people that their last name is Mizrahi.”

For Dani, of Turkish and Cuban background in his 30s, Sephardic is a term that applies to “any Jew who is not Ashkenazi.” This broader definition helps him make sense of the term; if Sephardic would otherwise refer only to Iberian Jews, he wonders, why do Syrians and Persian Jews he knows also identify as Sephardic? Daniel argued that a cohesive category of Sephardic for many communities makes sense since it also describes

a shared experience of having lived in Muslim-majority environments, where cultural exchange further expanded what Sephardic identity could encompass.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN

In general Latin Jews have strong ties to their country of origin, and Latin Sephardic Jews are no exception. Most have robust Sephardic and sub-ethnic (Syrian, Turkish, Moroccan) identities that precede their time in Latin America, yet their Latin American countries of origin also shape their identities. Many maintain ties to their families and friends in Latin America, traveling regularly to see them; others follow the local news of their countries of origin and some continue to have business dealings in them. Even as countries of origin continue to be important markers of self and group identities, over time Latin Jews have begun to share in a new pan-ethnic identity in the United States. Latin Sephardic Jews who attend Ashkenazi-led Jewish organizations such as the JCC, Hillel Day School, or Chabad are much more likely to understand and construct their identity around the shared “Latin” and “Sephardic” parts of their background, and over time, country of origin is becoming less salient in their sense of self.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

Latin Sephardic Jewish immigrants come from countries where racial categories differ from those found in the United States. When asked what racial categories they most identify with, many respondents did not have a simple answer. Some answered white, Latino, or other. Others said African and/or Jewish, Sephardic, or Latin Sephardic. Many felt that no one category contained all the facets of their identities. One factor that can define



racial categories in the United States is phenotype—i.e. what someone looks like physically. Yet this measure is imperfect for Latin Sephardic Jews because some may have physical traits that mark them as non-white (dark skin, dark hair, etc.), yet they don't identify as racially different than white. Others wonder if country of origin should be a factor in racial categorization. Ariel, a 67-year-old man of Turkish origin, born in Cuba with family connections to Venezuela, with family connections to Venezuela, when asked about his racial identity, answered:

"White... I'm not very white, but I'm not black, nor African. My wife, although she was born in Africa, looks more like you²⁷ than someone else because they [his wife's family] were Jews."

His comment illustrates the ambiguities that exist in US racial categorization and how difficult it is for people whose origins, phenotype, and religious identities overlap in ways that make clean categorization difficult.

Jewishness is a core identity for Latin Sephardic Jews. For many, their Jewish identity sets them apart in their home countries (or their parents' or grandparents' home countries), and Jewishness is the link that ties them to their community, their family, and their sense of self. For Dani, there is a Jewish "race":

"If you were to take a very white looking person, looks very white and American, who's Jewish and another white person who's not Jewish, I feel like you would feel like there's a different vibe. I don't know

how to describe it, it's [Jewishness] a lot more than culture, we were born into this. So, I do think Jewish people are a race."

When respondents were pressed to pick a Census classification category, most chose white and Hispanic. These are the categories they typically select on official forms and documents.

Some Latin Sephardic Jews have experienced a tension between wanting to assimilate into the broader American population (i.e. White) while trying to maintain a Latin Jewish identity that differs from the non-Jewish white majority. Paula, a 32-year-old US-born Jewish woman of Cuban and Turkish descent, wrestled with wanting to name her identity but also felt the pull and necessity of assimilation:

"I think part of it [racial and ethnic classification] is the journey of the Cuban Jew was different than others in that there was... At least in Miami, there was a need to assimilate to avoid the racism they were experiencing. And the Sephardic Jews have a strong tradition of assimilating to the communities that they move into. And so, it wasn't great to be marked as 'other.' You wanted to try to just be American. But there's also the advantages that you get by marking that you're different."

JEW OF COLOR

Jews of color is a relatively new category that has become popular with American Jewish institutions in an

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In the Sephardic world, these divisions—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform—don’t exist. Everyone is just a Jew who observes.”

attempt to be inclusive of Jews across racial categories. While institutions have often defined Latin Sephardic Jews as JOC, the respondents in this study do not see themselves as such. Some had never heard of the term, whereas others associated it with a less privileged group. And for others it was simply viewed as ambiguous and possibly divisive among the larger Jewish population. As Ben, a 31-year-old man of Syrian descent, born in the US to Colombian parents, said,

“I wouldn’t think in those terms [Jew of color]. I think there’s unintended consequences to that. It makes essentially an Ashkenazi person a Jew of non-color, and I think that could be problematic.”

The term “Jew of color” is viewed as confusing and not apt for the identity of most Latin Sephardic Jews. Jacob, explained that he didn’t know “what constitutes a person of color, to be honest.”

While some found the term innocuous, others found the term “Jew of color” problematic, particularly as a category that is imposed on them simply because they are Hispanic and/or Sephardic. Ken, a 48-year-old man of Syrian descent, born in Guatemala, shared:

“Because when I describe myself, I think I’m White, but I’m apparently not white because I’m Hispanic and Sephardic. I don’t see myself as a Jew of color. Some are more dark and some are less dark. We all have color.”

Ken pointed out that by overemphasizing physical attributes, the term JOC creates unnecessary divisions within the larger Jewish population.

LATINO/HISPANIC IDENTITY

Most interviewees identified as Latin/o/a or Hispanic and were likely to select this on census or classification forms, and did not express preference over any of the terms. Sephardic Jews’ Latin and/or Hispanic identities are multifaceted, shaped by ties to their home countries in Latin America, cultural connections through language, music, behaviors and shared values with other Latinos, and increased social contact and networks with Sephardic Latin Jews from across the continent. Not all Sephardic Jews from Latin America identify as Latino, though, especially those from Syria, where Sephardic and Syrian ties are more prominent. Alon, a 30-year-old Argentine male of Syrian descent, described his experience:

“Argentina is clearly a country of immigrants, and immigrants often felt more connected to their countries of origin. I grew up in a Sephardic community bubble, so I didn’t feel particularly Argentinian or Latino. In our community, which was very Sephardic and Syrian, we had our own school, our own synagogue.”

None of the interviewees identified with the term Latinx, which aligns with general surveys in the US that show few Hispanics in the United States use the term. Some interviewees had never heard the term Latinx, while others said it did not apply to them.

JEWISH DENOMINATIONS

As Leon, a 75-year-old Moroccan male raised in Venezuela, noted,

“In the Sephardic world, these divisions—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform—don’t exist. Everyone is just a Jew who observes.”

Leon’s statement rings true for most Latin Sephardic Jews. Many find that in the United States they must make choices about denominational identities. Because Conservative and Reform synagogues are less traditional, Latin Sephardic Jews often turn to Orthodox congregations or Chabad for their religious needs, even as their religious observance outside of the synagogue varies.

Community

MAJOR COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

For many Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida, community life revolves around synagogues and religious institutions, and a large number of Sephardic synagogues serve the community. More general communal institutions also serve the community, with specific programs for the Latin Jewish community.

Synagogues and religious institutions

Many Latin Sephardic Jews in Miami have strong ties to synagogues and religious institutions. Some synagogues serve mainly Sephardic subethnic communities, (e.g., Syrian or Moroccan Sephardic), while others are more pan-ethnic (Latin Jewish).

Safra Synagogue, located in Aventura, and Magen David, located in Surfside, both serve the Latin Syrian community. Beit Rambam in Sunny Isles is led by a Sephardic Argentine/Colombian rabbi and serves both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Colombian residents. Netive Ezra serves a Moroccan population in the Highland

Lakes area of Miami; it is, according to one respondent, roughly half Latin and half Israeli. Oziel Sephardic Synagogue, located in Surfside, also serves Sephardic Jews of Moroccan descent, both Latin and non-Latin. Temple Moses is rooted in traditions brought from Turkey and Cuba by its founders over 80 years ago. Skylake Synagogue, a Modern Orthodox synagogue located in North Miami Beach, has grown rapidly in recent years, in part due to many Venezuelan Jews. A new larger building for Skylake Synagogue will feature two sanctuaries, one for Ashkenazi and one for Sephardic services. The Presidential Shul is a newly formed congregation housed in a tent within the confines of a gated community and serving a majority Sephardic Latin Orthodox community. Lastly, three Chabad centers are located in the area. Chabad South in Aventura serves many Latin Jews, both Sephardic and Ashkenazi. Aventura Chabad (more commonly known as Chabad North) is housed in a contemporary new building with both Sephardic and Ashkenazi shuls. The Shul of Bal Harbour is located in the upper-middle class area of Surfside and hosts a Sephardic minyan.

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Many Latin Sephardic Jews in Miami have strong ties to synagogues and religious institutions.

Hebraica

In North Miami, Hebraica, part of the Michael-Ann Russell Jewish Community Center, serves as a gathering space for Latin Jews living in South Florida. Here, they socialize, network, and develop a pan-ethnic community. Founded in the 1980s by Latin Jews, Hebraica aimed to recreate the close-knit communal life experienced in Latin America. Today, Hebraica hosts youth and cultural programs, and a youth leadership training program. Activities such as the Maccabi games, where

Latin American countries are represented and compete in athletic events, bring together Latin Jewish groups through events reminiscent of those in their home countries.

Jewish Federation

The Jewish Federation of Greater Miami actively supports events and programs intended to attract and include Sephardic and Ashkenazi Latin Jews. Additionally, the Federation supports social services, schools, and programs for those in need across all Jewish groups and communities. While all programs, instruction, and communication are in English, families and students converse in Spanish within and outside the school walls.

Scheck Hillel Community Day School

Scheck Hillel Community Day School, or simply Hillel, has gained popularity among Sephardic Latin Jewish families seeking an Orthodox Jewish education combined with strong secular studies. The school follows a Modern Orthodox approach, appealing to families seeking a religious foundation, even if the teachings are not specifically Sephardic.

Benchi soccer

Founded by a Colombian/Argentine Sephardic Jew, Benchi Soccer caters to observant and traditional Jewish children whose families observe Shabbat. Since the JCC's soccer programs often hold games or practices on Saturdays, Benchi Soccer offers an alternative for families who would otherwise be unable to participate.

MORAL FRAMEWORKS

Family

Family is at the center of Latin Sephardic life. One way this manifests itself is through Shabbat dinners, which are a mainstay of the Latin Sephardic community—especially among those with extended family or large networks of co-ethnics living in close proximity. But even for families with smaller social networks nearby, Shabbat dinners are a core piece of their Sephardic identity, as Dani described:

“[Shabbat is] like a Jewish lifestyle. I think doing Friday Shabbat is like a lifestyle, you don't really meet a lot of Jewish people who are Sephardic who don't do Friday night meal, like as a family. You don't see that.”

Generational continuity is a central value in the Latin Sephardic community. It is expected that young people will marry and have children, reinforcing the importance of family across generations. Moreover, there is an expectation that Jews marry other Jews. There are strong mores against intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews—but Sephardic and Ashkenazi couplings are generally accepted.

Religion

The past decades have seen rising levels of religiosity among Latin Sephardic Jews both in Miami and Latin America. Increasingly, Orthodox and Haredi practices

NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- ➔ South Florida has multiple Sephardic synagogues reflecting a variety of international cultures and local liturgical traditions.
- ➔ Hebraica, part of the JCC, was founded in the 1980s by Latin Jews to recreate communal life from Latin America.
- ➔ Scheck Hillel School is particularly popular with Latin Sephardic Jews

are becoming more normalized and even expected in some communities. While members of the Syrian Latin community—expats from Panama, Argentina, Mexico and Brazil—have traditionally been more observant, today other subethnic groups are following suit. For example, many Latin Sephardic Jews of Moroccan descent have become more involved in their local Orthodox synagogues, adhering to strict dietary kosher laws and observing Shabbat. As younger people become more observant, nearby synagogues, kosher restaurants, and mikvehs have emerged to meet their needs. Parents of adult children who adhere to kosher dietary rules have begun maintaining kosher homes themselves so that their children and grandchildren can eat in them.

Gender norms

Many Latin Sephardic households adhere to traditional gender roles, with women expected to manage most of the domestic work and child-rearing, while men are expected to earn most of the household income. While this traditional practice is not true across all households, nor does it prevent women from working outside the home, a majority of the families interviewed for this study subscribe to it in one way or another.

Politics

Political preferences among Latin Sephardic Jews are often influenced by their experiences with socialism in their home countries. Cuban and Venezuelan Jews tend to favor Republican candidates, viewing them as opposing socialist elements they associate with the Democratic party. Israel has become one of the most important issues among Latin Sephardic Jews, and the extent to which others—political candidates, public officials, other communities—support Israel often plays a significant role in how Latin Sephardic Jews relate to them. In the most recent election cycle, Israel was the pivotal issue around which voters coalesced—and most Latin Sephardic Jews (Venezuelan, Argentine, Mexican, Cuban and Colombian) professed leaning towards the Republican candidate.

BOUNDARIES OF BELONGING

Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida are extremely diverse in terms of country of origin and level of religiosity. Latin Jews see themselves and understand their

larger community as Latin and Jewish. This is particularly true for those who have a large network of Latin Jews from their home countries or have created new networks through interactions at communal and religious institutions. At the same time, a narrower sense of community exists for subethnic groups—Syrian, Moroccan, Turkish—that play a mediating role in who belongs and who does not. Moroccan Jewish immigrants from Latin America, for example, spoke at length about their ties to Spanish

SELECTED SYNAGOGUES SERVING SOUTH FLORIDA'S LATIN SEPHARDIC JEWISH COMMUNITY



1

Oziel Sephardic Synagogue (Surfside)
Moroccan background, includes Latin and non-Latin Jews.

2

Temple Moses (Miami Beach)
Turkish-Cuban roots, over 80 years old.

3

Netive Ezra (Highland Lakes, North Miami)
Serves Moroccan Jews, half Latin and half Israeli.

4

Safra Synagogue (Aventura)
Latin Syrian community hub.

5

Magen David (Surfside)
Another key site for the Latin Syrian community.



Morocco, and by extension their ties to Spain. While part of the large Latin Jewish group and Sephardic community, their strongest sense of communal attachment lies with other Spanish Moroccan Jews from Latin America. Intragroup ties within the Syrian community are likewise strong. As Daniel, a 33-year-old man of Syrian descent, born in Argentina,

“In general, I feel like I know people in the [Latin Syrian] community. I don’t feel like I’m an outsider, but I do see maybe as someone new it can be a little bit hard for them, but when you’re inside [the community] I think that well, people help you, they invite you to their house, they always try to see what’s best for the other.”

COMMUNITY CHALLENGES

Few respondents mentioned communal problems with mental health, addiction, or economic vulnerability. It may be that respondents in the study were uncomfortable divulging sensitive information to an outsider, or that subjects such as these are taboo and not spoken about outside the family unit. To be certain, respondents spoke of donating to or volunteering with local social service organizations such as the kosher food pantry or The Closet (a donation-based used clothing store), but no one spoke of personally needing these services.

Nonetheless, some respondents surfaced communal challenges. Strong communal attachments, which have many positive aspects, can also have negative effects, as Jacky, a 31-year-old US-born man with Guatemalan, Venezuelan and Moroccan roots, explained:

“It’s [the Latin Spanish Moroccan community in Miami] such a close-knit community that there’s almost a social pressure to keep behaving in the same way. So that’s a beautiful part of it. The annoying part of it is that it’s so close-knit that you have no privacy and it’s very judgmental and it’s very close minded. For example, the idea that anybody would come out of the closet as gay in my community is, it just would make no sense to me. Gay people don’t exist. Statistically speaking, it’s just not possible [that gay people don’t exist in the community]. Even people being more [politically and socially] liberal also is very rare [in this community].”

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

As crises roil Latin America, Latin Jews continue to seek economic and political relief in South Florida. Latin Sephardic Jewish immigrants from Venezuela, Mexico, and Colombia as well as smaller communities, drive communal replenishment. It is well known that new immigrants rely on religious and communal institutions for material (i.e. food, clothing) and non-material assistance (job leads, housing assistance, fellowship) as they integrate into their new countries. When immigrants rely on places like synagogues, Jewish centers, and local groups for help, these places have to find new ways to support them. At the same time, it makes these places stronger because more people become part of them.

There has been a shift in the levels of religiosity among Latin Sephardic Jews. Many interviewees spoke about the increased levels of religious observance and greater acceptance of Orthodoxy and Chabad. While the majority of Latin Sephardic Jews describe their upbringings as traditional, today many are more likely than their parents to keep kosher, strictly observe Shabbat, and participate in Orthodox religious institutions. Chabad has played an outsized role in the provision of services and community-building for new immigrants. Latin Sephardic Jews feel welcomed and at home, and they have become an integral part of Chabad communities in South Florida.

Interactions

ASHKENAZI INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURE

Religion and denominations

Several interviewees noted that differences in religiosity and denominational identities and institutions can lead to misunderstandings among Ashkenazi Jews about Sephardic Jews. Others noted that a lack of knowledge about Sephardic culture and religious practices, traditions, and faith create obstacles to Sephardic Jews' feeling included in Ashkenazi circles and institutions. Paula, a Miami native whose parents immigrated from Turkey to Cuba and later Miami, explained the different approaches to spiritualism and traditionalism between Sephardic and Ashkenazi cultures:

“So I think that we’re much more spiritual. And I think you can see some of that in the Ashkenazi setup of having Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, which you don’t find in the Sephardic community. Everyone just goes to a synagogue that follows traditional customs and has an Orthodox rabbi and setup, but that’s not necessarily how they live their lives. ... There’s an understanding of like, I know that I’m doing the wrong thing. I know that right now I should be at Temple, but I decided to go to dinner with my family and that’s okay. That’s where I am right now. It doesn’t make me less of a Jew. Versus in the Ashkenazi setting, it’s like, oh, you are now breaking Shabbat. We don’t believe in this. So now you have to be Conservative or Reform. You can’t be Orthodox anymore.”

Ben echoed Paula’s statement:

“I think in an Ashkenazi world, there’s a dichotomy. Either you’re religious or you’re not, or you’re secular. And in dating Ashkenazi girls in the past, they were

always very confused about my approach to religion. Like, oh, you don’t appear religious, but you have this sort of reverence for religion, yet you kind of straddle this secular-religious divide in a way that I think is foreign to many in an Ashkenazi world.”

Chabad

Chabad plays an important role in the lives of Sephardic Jews in Miami and is a space where Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews interact and create community. Latin Sephardic Jews who go away to college often turn to Chabad as a home away from home. Some of the Chabad rabbis have strong ties to Latin American countries, which is a draw for Sephardic Latin American immigrants. For example, one Chabad rabbi in the Miami area is the son of a prominent Chabad rabbi in Buenos Aires, and this connection draws a lot of Argentine Jews, both Ashkenazi and Sephardic, to Chabad. Many Latin Sephardic Jews feel Chabad is particularly welcoming to them in ways that other

“

I think that we’re much more spiritual. There’s an understanding of I know that I’m doing the wrong thing....that’s okay. That’s where I am right now. It doesn’t make me less of a Jew.

Orthodox Ashkenazi institutions are not. This occurs through the formation and support of Sephardic min-yans—as is the case in Aventura Chabad and the Shul of Bal Harbour (a Chabad center)—and the inclusion of Sephardic foods served during social events.

BEYOND MIAMI

As Latin Sephardic Jews attend summer camp outside South Florida, move away for college, or relocate to other areas for professional opportunities, they encounter Jewish institutions and populations that are both less knowledgeable about Sephardic culture and less accommodating to their needs. Outside of South Florida, Jewish college students are more likely to be English-speaking, American-born, and Ashkenazi. They may not understand the culture, ways of practice, food, and behaviors of Latin Sephardic Jews. Jewish institutions such as Hillels and Jewish Federations are likely to have events that assume Ashkenazi culture and exclude Sephardic culture.



CHABAD: WHERE COMMUNITIES MEET

Many Latin Sephardic Jews feel Chabad is particularly welcoming in ways that other Orthodox Ashkenazi institutions are not

Participants spoke about the “Jewish” foods served at events at Federations, Hillels or area synagogues typically being kugel or bagels and lox, i.e., Ashkenazi foods, but rarely Sephardic foods such as kibbe and borekas.

EDUCATION

Jewish day school education is another area where Sephardic Jews sometimes feel excluded. One interviewee remembers learning the history of Israel through a European lens that featured the plight of European Jews and the activism of Theodor Herzl. He later realized that his story and ties to Israel as a Syrian Jew are much different than what he had learned at his US Jewish day school. He laments that a wider history of Israel that is inclusive of the experiences of Sephardic Jews is not part of the day school curriculum.

STEREOTYPES REGARDING SEPHARDIC JEWS

Interviewees also cited stereotypes about a lack of intellectualism, education, and professional aspirations as impediments to their inclusion in Ashkenazi spaces. Most of the respondents in the study have college degrees, and many are engaged in professional occupations such as medicine, law, architecture, and computer technology. Yet they have faced questions about their professional credentials in Ashkenazi-majority settings. Dani, a 30 year-old accountant of Cuban and Turkish descent, born in Miami, commented on this phenomenon:

“A common joke is they [Ashkenazi Jews] don’t understand how I’m an accountant because Sephardic Jews generally are not accountants. Most Sephardic Jews are generally in business or some sort of commerce. Obviously, the stereotype, the inverse of that is that Ashkenazi are lawyers, doctors, professionals.”

Micah, a 38-year-old woman born in the US to Cuban and Guatemalan parents of Syrian and Eastern European descent, has had similar experiences:

“Someone made the assumption the other day that my mother must not be educated and that it must be really unusual that I have a graduate degree because Sephardic Mizrahi Jews are very traditional and how I must be like a trailblazer in my family for that.”

OTHER SEPHARDI/MIZRAHI COMMUNITIES

While most Latin Sephardic Jews say they share commonalities with other US Sephardic Jews, most also prefer to pray and socialize within their Latin Sephardic communities. Second-generation Latin Sephardic Jews or those who have moved away from Miami are more likely to engage within the larger Sephardic community, either through organizations such as the Sephardic Brotherhood or a Sephardic synagogue. They are also more likely to form bonds with other non-Latin Sephardic Jews because of these interactions. Some populations, such as the Latin Syrian population, have ties to Syrian communities in Brooklyn, NY and Deal, New Jersey. Their friends and family connections bridge their communities, and even if this is not what Latin Syrian Sephardic Jews consider their “primary”

community, they feel connected to other Syrian Jews in the United States.

NON-JEWS FROM LATIN AMERICA

In general, Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida are members of tight-knit communities, and for many their interactions with the larger non-Jewish Latin population of Miami are limited to work environments or to service providers (e.g., shop personnel, household help, etc.). Many Latin Sephardic Jews live in gated communities or full-service buildings in proximity to other community members, which limits outside interaction. Moreover, the centrality of Jewish institutions in their lives, such as day schools, synagogues, and/or the JCC, also restricts connections with non-Jews. Those who are less observant are much more likely to have broader contact outside of their communities, sometimes interacting with non-Jewish Hispanics in Latin food establishments or through the provision of cultural items from their homeland. As a result, their work and social life is more inclusive and diverse across religious and ethnic groups.



SECTION 5.

Distinctions



We are highlighting North African and Ladino-influenced foods, customs and words in this section, even though the Miami Latin Sephardic interviewees come from diverse regional backgrounds.

What is distinctive about this community compared to the other three?

The Sephardic Latin Jewish population in South Florida stands out for its unique characteristics:

Amalgamation of Diverse Communities: South Florida's Jewish community is a mosaic of identities where no single group dominates. Sephardic Jews from numerous Latin countries of origin and with multiple ancestral roots in the Middle East and North Africa create a rich tapestry of cultural diversity across the South Florida region.

Influence of Chabad: Chabad has had an outsize influence on the development of a strong Latin Sephardic community that includes people from diverse backgrounds (i.e. Turkey, Morocco, Syria) and Latin American countries. Chabad North and Chabad South in Aventura have vibrant Sephardic minyans and offer welcoming atmospheres for Latin Sephardic families. Chabad also works to meet the needs of new immigrants by providing programs such as young adult meet-ups, childcare, and community get-to-know-you events, among others. As the popularity of Chabad has grown, so has its influence on levels of religiosity among the Latin Sephardic population in South Florida.

A Vibrant, Constantly Growing Community: South Florida stands out as a global hub for Sephardic Jews, attracting steady migration from Latin America and beyond, including Francophone Sephardic and Israeli Sephardic Jews. South Florida's population thrives on new waves of immigrants and a constant flow of visitors during holidays and major events.



FOODS OF THE LATIN SEPHARDIC JEWISH COMMUNITY



Moroccan Fish:

A traditional North African dish, typically made with white fish fillets such as snapper, sea bass, halibut, or tilapia, baked in a spicy, garlicky tomato sauce with peppers, cilantro, paprika, cumin, and sometimes preserved lemon or olives. It is a popular dish for Friday night Shabbat dinners among Moroccan Jews.

Adafina

A slow-cooked Sephardic stew, especially associated with Moroccan Jews. Unlike Ashkenazi cholent, where ingredients are mixed together, Adafina maintains its elements distinctly separated within the pot. It typically includes barley, whole eggs (cooked in the stew until brown), chickpeas, potatoes, and meat, and is cooked overnight for Shabbat lunch.



Borkas:

Flaky, stuffed pastries of Turkish and Sephardic origin, often filled with cheese, potato, spinach, or meat. Traditionally made with phyllo or puff pastry, borkas are popular for Shabbat and holiday meals and are a staple in Sephardic Jewish cuisine.

Nowhere is the fusion of cultures more apparent than at a Latin Sephardic Shabbat table, where **Moroccan fish** might sit alongside **Venezuelan and Colombian arepas** (cornmeal patties), **Israeli salad**, and **Peruvian ceviche** (fish marinated and "cooked" in citrus). Cuban influences are also present, with dishes like **picadillo** (a savory-sweet ground beef dish with tomatoes and raisins) and **arroz con pollo** (rice with chicken) making their way onto the table—representing the diverse cuisines of the many countries Sephardic Jews have called home.

CUSTOMS

Berberisca / Henna Night: A popular Moroccan tradition that has also spread to many other MENA communities, the Henna or Berberisca night takes place before the wedding. On this evening, brides wear a traditional Henna or Berberisca dress, unique to each region and adorned with distinct colors, symbols, and motifs that reflect both Jewish and Moroccan heritage. The dress is often passed down through generations. As part of the celebration, brides and guests receive decorative henna designs on their hands, symbolizing joy and blessing.

Kazu de Mosaf: Many Turkish Sephardic families still gather for a post-Shabbat-morning meal featuring foods like borekas (cheese-filled pastries), boyos (cheese or spinach-filled dough spirals), huevos haminados (slow-cooked eggs), keftes de prasa (leek fritters), and sutch (Turkish-style rice pudding).

POPULAR WORDS/ EXPRESSIONS

Respondents mentioned few slang terms, but some continue to use some words in Arabic or Haketia.

Some examples follow:

Selquear:

(Haketia) Let it go, let it pass.

Wakshalu:

(Haketia) nostalgic.

Mashallah:

(Arabic) God has willed it, used to express admiration.

Methodology

DEFINITIONS

To ground our work, we began by employing expansive definitions of Sephardic and Mizrahi identity, incorporating the broadest interpretations of these groups. This included Jews who trace their lineage to the Iberian Peninsula (today Spain and Portugal), as well as Jews who come from, or are the descendants of those who come from, the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Middle East. We also included populations whose primary identity is organized around a different local identifier, such as Bukharian Jews, but who identify as Sephardic in their approach to Jewish law and custom. This definition guided our literature review, analysis, and overall research approach.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD OVERSIGHT

This research project was approved by New York University's Institutional Review Board, IRB-FY2023-7177.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We researched and wrote four in-depth white papers as part of a literature review to inform our work. Though not reproduced in their entirety, Section 2 of this report (Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States) incorporates materials from them. The white papers included a detailed review of academic research on Sephardic Jews in the United States, where we explored key trends, identified gaps, and examined what this body of work reveals about the field—or its lack of formal organization—when it comes to contemporary Sephardic Jews. We also created a comprehensive narrative history compiling what is currently known about

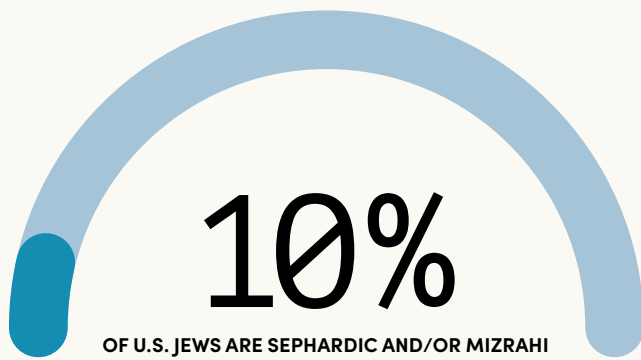
Sephardic Jews in the US, providing critical context and continuity. Another paper focused on the histories and nuances of Sephardic and Mizrahi identity categories, delving into their evolution and the complexities surrounding their use. Finally, we wrote an analysis of how race and ethnicity intersect with Sephardic and Mizrahi identities, considering the historical and contemporary dynamics shaping these discussions.²⁸

QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Our quantitative estimates were produced by researchers at the Cohen CMJS at Brandeis University. They did not collect new data but instead analyzed recent national and communal surveys, including the Pew Research Center's 2020 survey of US Jews;²⁹ seven local Jewish community surveys conducted by CMJS for Jewish Federations in Chicago (2020), Los Angeles (2021), Greater MetroWest, NJ (2020), Kansas City (2021), Long Beach, CA (2021–22), Louisville (2021–22), and Delaware (2022);³⁰ the Jewish Community Study of New York (2023) conducted by SSRS for the UJA Federation of New York;³¹ and surveys of Birthright Israel applicants in 2020, 2021, and 2022 conducted by CMJS.³²

The Pew Center's public-use data file does not have geographic data at the state or metro levels. Therefore, at CMJS' request, Pew Research Center provided estimates of the Sephardic and Mizrahi populations in the eight local Jewish communities and transmitted those to CMJS for further analysis. UJA Federation of New York provided CMJS with estimates of the Sephardic/Mizrahi population from the 2023 Jewish Community of New York. Neither the Pew Research Center, UJA Federation of New York, nor SSRS bear any responsibility for the analyses presented here.

We made deliberate choices in determining our



estimates of the share of US Jewish adults who are Sephardic and/or Mizrahi. We employed a lower-bound, baseline estimate of 7% from the 2020 Pew Research Center 2020 survey and then upward-adjusted estimates of 8%, 10%, and 11% based on the eight local community studies for which there is data on Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. CMJS’s methods for adjusting the Pew baseline estimate are detailed in Section 3 of the report. From among the upward-adjusted estimates, we selected 10% as our estimate of the Sephardic and Mizrahi population in the US. We believe this estimate is reasonable with the available data and with the well-documented lower survey response rates among immigrants, ethnic minorities, and non-English speakers,³³ which then tend to result in undercounts of these groups.

In addition to generating estimates of the size of the Sephardic and Mizrahi populations, CMJS analyzed data from its seven community studies and the New York Jewish community study to examine socio-demographic and Jewish characteristics of Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi respondents. CMJS used Birthright Israel applicant data selectively in their analysis and we report them selectively, too. This is because Birthright applicants are not representative of the American Jewish community, of the eligible age cohort, or of a particular geographic locale. Findings reported by the Birthright applicants are included for context and not direct comparison.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

We selected four communities that we determined fit within the Sephardic/Mizrahi category and were shaped by the US 1965 immigration reforms that significantly increased immigration from regions including Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The four communities were

the Syrian community in Brooklyn, NY; the Bukharian community in Queens, NY; the Persian community in Los Angeles; and the Latin Sephardic population hub in South Florida. Through this community portrait lens, we gained valuable insights into ethnic enclaves and communities shaped by structural ethnicity, particularly those with origins in Muslim-majority countries.

Instrumentation

The researchers developed an interview protocol that covered a variety of topics, including basic demographic information; the meaning of ethnic, racial, and religious categories; community and belonging; social networks and boundaries; and relationships with Ashkenazi Jews and institutions. The protocols were reviewed by the project’s academic advisors and by select community informants before it was finalized.

Data collection

Our qualitative data was gathered primarily through 1-hour interviews via Zoom, supplemented by in-person interviews. We also conducted site visits in each community to institutions and homes and observations in public spaces. Our research team included those fluent in Spanish, English, Hebrew, Persian, and Russian to accommodate linguistic diversity. More specifically:

1. The Persian community portrait was based on 44 interviews conducted primarily by Dr. Ilana Horwitz specifically for this study, with additional contributions from Lerone Edalati, who conducted some interviews, including in Persian.
2. The Bukharian community portrait was based on 40 interviews conducted primarily by Dr. Elana Riback Rand specifically for this study. A Russian-speaking translator was available and offered to interviewees, but none requested the translator’s services.
3. The Latin Sephardic community portrait was based on 28 interviews conducted primarily by Dr. Laura Limonic during this study in both English and Spanish, supplemented with data from Dr. Limonic’s broader research on Latin Jews across the US.

- The Syrian community portrait was based on 10 interviews conducted primarily by Dr. Elana Riback Rand, supplemented by a secondary analysis of data from more than 100 interviews with Syrian Jews conducted as part of Dr. Bitton’s doctoral research.

As Research Director, Dr. Mijal Bitton conducted interviews across all four communities to provide a shared bridge and identify themes that emerged throughout the study.

Sampling and recruitment

In total, we conducted 122 interviews across these four community portraits. Our interviewees included 64 women, 57 men, and one non-binary individual, and represented a diverse range of ages: 16 in their 20s, 45 in their 30s, 22 in their 40s, 12 in their 50s, 21 in their 60s, 5 in their 70s, and 2 in their 80s.

We used a snowball sampling method to identify interview subjects, leveraging social media, listservs, and outreach to institutions and community gatekeepers. Some communities were easier to access than others, and we consistently encountered a “trust gap.” If there was a personal connection to one of the researchers (i.e., a community leader or friend vouched for us) then there was greater openness to be interviewed. Where we had more connections, we had a much easier time establishing trust and gaining access. Personal connections often proved more effective than credentials in securing interviews. Relationships with community insiders and the reputations of team members in these communities were instrumental in gaining access.

We recognize that the individuals we reached most easily often shared certain characteristics—typically younger and with more secular education. In some communities, accessing Haredi segments and those in lower socio-economic strata proved more challenging.

Community	Gender	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s
Syrian Jewish Community In NY	3F, 7M	0	1	5	1	2	0	1
Bukharian Community in Queens	22F, 18 M	7	15	10	1	4	2	1
Persian Jewish Community in LA	24F, 19M, 1 non-binary	9	14	4	6	10	1	0
Latin Sephardic Community in South Florida	15F, 13M	0	14	3	4	5	2	0
Total	64 women, 57 men, and one non-binary individual	16	45	22	12	21	5	2

To mitigate this sampling unevenness, we sought input from community members who represented broader diversity. For example, when the LA portrait was primarily shaped by data from young Persian Jews in their 30s, we had Persian Jews from older age brackets review it to ensure a more balanced perspective. As part of our triangulation approach (see below), we sent out the portrait for review, incorporating feedback to refine and enhance the accuracy of our findings.

The interviews for this research were conducted confidentially, with identifying details removed or altered to protect participants' privacy. Informed consent was obtained, and all data was anonymized to ensure confidentiality. The names in this report are pseudonyms.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and systematically coded for analysis. The coding scheme was developed jointly by the researchers. Research assistants coded the interviews.

Triangulation approach

Our study employed multiple forms of triangulation to ensure the validity, reliability, and depth of our qualitative data:

1. Diverse Perspectives

- We actively sought to capture a range of perspectives by engaging both institutional leaders and broader community members within each community.
- To further validate our findings, we ensured 3-4 individuals from each community, including institutional leaders, reviewed and provided feedback on complete draft of their community portrait.

2. Collaborative Research Team

Our team consisted of five researchers who collected qualitative data, four researchers who analyzed the data, and research assistants who supported the coding process. This collaborative effort allowed us to incorporate multiple viewpoints and interpretations, minimizing individual biases.

3. Contextual Triangulation

We used a variety of contexts to gather data, including interviews, site visits to homes and institutions, and observations in public spaces. This approach enabled us to understand community dynamics in diverse settings and identify consistent themes across contexts.

4. Practitioner Feedback

During the development of practitioner recommendations, we shared our report—including community portraits—with a diverse group of Sephardic practitioners across the United States, many of whom were from the communities profiled in our study. Their perspectives served as an additional layer of data triangulation, helping to refine and contextualize our analysis and recommendations.

By employing these triangulation methods, we ensured that our research findings were well-rounded, credible, and reflective of the complexities within the communities we studied. This multi-faceted approach strengthened the rigor and applicability of our study.



SECTION 2.

Selected Works Consulted

This appendix provides a list of selected works consulted during the research for this study. It is provided for readers who wish to learn more about Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews and related topics referenced in the report. It is not an exhaustive list of all works the research team consulted in preparing this report.

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NOTES

- 1 For the sake of describing Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews, this report often refers to Ashkenazi Jewry as a singular majority group. Of course, Ashkenazi Jewry is also highly diverse, but that diversity has been extensively explored elsewhere and is not our focus here.
- 2 Throughout this report, “America” and “American” refer specifically to the United States of America. The terms “America,” “United States,” and “US” are used interchangeably.
- 3 As opposed to “a little” or “not at all.”
- 4 Economically vulnerable defined as answering “can’t make ends meet” or “just managing to make ends meet” on a question asking for self-assessment of current financial situation, as opposed to answering “have enough money,” “have some extra money,” or “well off.”
- 5 Our recommendations are grounded in the primary data we collected from the four focus communities, supplemented by literature reviews, survey data from community and national studies, and conversations with academics, practitioners, and community leaders from diverse Sephardic and Mizrahi backgrounds. We also convened a roundtable of Sephardic and Mizrahi practitioners who reviewed an early draft of this report and engaged in a generative discussion about practitioner-oriented recommendations. These recommendations were further reviewed by additional practitioners in the field, who offered feedback and reactions based on their own experiences and perspectives.

Although our primary focus was on specific communities, we also drew on our broader knowledge of other Sephardic and Mizrahi populations in the US who were not directly included in our data collection. These include Jews integrated into Ashkenazi-majority or non-Jewish spaces, members of blended families, descendants of pre-1924 immigrant groups (such as Greek, Turkish, Spanish, or Portuguese Jews), newer immigrants including Israeli Mizrahi Jews living in the US, and individuals who have recently discovered genealogical or ancestral connections to historic Sephardic Jews. Although we do not offer specific recommendations for these additional groups, the principles of inclusion and cultural recognition that underlie our findings have broader relevance and can inform efforts to support the diversity of the American Jewish community.

- 6 Kitniyot generally refers to small, grain-like foods such as rice, corn, lentils, beans, peas, and mustard seeds, which Ashkenazi Jews historically—and until today—did not eat on Passover.
- 7 We will expand on *masortiyut* in the community portrait section of this study. Given the popular use of this term, it is worth noting that scholarship on *masortiyut* resists framing traditional populations as untouched by the modern world.

NOTES (CONTINUED)

- 8 While Ashkenazi siddurim generally follow Nusach [liturgical style] Ashkenaz or Nusach Sefard (which incorporates some Kabbalistic elements), contemporary Sephardic siddurim are labeled Nusach edot Hamizrah. Just as Sephardic Halakha and minhag evolved in diverse regions, so too did Sephardic siddurim, with some adhering closely to specific communal nusach (such as Moroccan, Syrian, or Turkish traditions), while others reflect a broader edot Hamizrah tradition, developed in the past century as a standardized pan-Sephardic liturgy. Though the siddur text itself does not dictate pronunciation, differences in vocalization reflect the phonetic traditions of each community, further illustrating the distinct yet complementary nature of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish practices.
- 9 As a geographic marker, Mizrahi” which means “Eastern” is sometimes inaccurate, as many of these communities originated west of Israel. For example, Moroccan Jews, the largest Mizrahi-identified population in Israel, historically called themselves Maghrebi (Westerners).
- 10 This law contributed to the growth of Jewish communities from these areas across Latin America, including migration to Cuba, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and other countries.
- 11 Likewise, there are Jews who identify as Ashkenazi and also as Asian, black, Hispanic and Middle Eastern, and there are Jews who identify as Ashkenazi who reject US racial categories altogether, including Ashkenazi Jews who are white-presenting but reject white as a racial identity.
- 12 See the Methodology Appendix for more information about these studies. Neither the Pew Research Center, UJA Federation of New York, nor SSRS bear any responsibility for the analyses presented here.
- 13 In addition, the Pew Research Center survey and New York survey use the term Sephardic, while CMJS surveys use Sephardi. For consistency’s sake in this report, we use Sephardic.
- 14 By way of contrast, the Brandeis researchers estimate the share of the US Jewish population that identifies as Ashkenazi ranges from 71% to 76%.
- 15 MENA percentages are those who first said their race was “other” and then wrote in a MENA country.
- 16 Economically vulnerable defined as answering “can’t make ends meet” or “just managing to make ends meet” on a question asking for self-assessment of current financial situation, as opposed to answering have enough money, have some extra money, or well off.

NOTES (CONTINUED)

- 17 As opposed to a little or not at all.
- 18 Among those who are married.
- 19 See the [2021 LA community study conducted by the Cohen Center at Brandeis](#) and its data on Persian Jews. As well as [UJA's 2023 New York Study](#) and its corresponding data on Syrian Jews and Bukharian Jews
- 20 The New York Syrian Jewish community is one of several Syrian Jewish communities around the world, all known for their cohesive nature and strong institutional networks. Other major communities exist in Buenos Aires, São Paulo, Panama City, and Mexico City. Each has developed its own unique elements and, over time, has come to function more independently, though familial and business networks continue to connect them.
- 21 This calculation is based on 95% confidence intervals for this population provided by UJA-Federation of New York.
- 22 Maurice is referring here to individuals who use pronouns beyond the heteronormative binary of he/she, as well as the broader political and activist movement to normalize these identities. At the time of his interview, pronouns were a contentious issue in the cultural and political landscape, prominently featured in national elections as a dividing line between Republicans and Democrats. Maurice reflects a more socially conservative stance, viewing the expansion of pronouns negatively and as something to be actively opposed.
- 23 UJA Federation of New York contributed to funding for this study.
- 24 From Poopa Dweck's 2007, *Aromas of Aleppo: The Legendary Cuisine of Syrian Jews*. p. 8.
- 25 This calculation is based on 95% confidence intervals for this population provided by UJA-Federation of New York to this study's researchers.
- 26 The previous paragraph highlighted amicable relationships between Jews and Muslims, while this one describes an interviewee's feeling of being "hated." Though this might seem contradictory, it reflects the complexity of our interviewees' memories and how dynamic and multi-faceted these relationships were. Some of this contrast stems from the diversity of attitudes toward Jews among Soviet authorities and neighboring Muslim communities, and the contexts of each of the Central Asian cities from which they emigrated. Some of the complexity also reflects a shift over time, from historic co-existence to escalating ethnic tensions in the years leading up to and following the collapse of the USSR.

NOTES (CONTINUED)

- 27 “You” refers to interviewer, who is a fair skinned, light-eyed woman of Ashkenazi descent.
- 28 The research team hopes to expand on these white papers and publish them independently at a future date.
- 29 The data file from the [2020 Pew Research Center survey of US Jews is available here](#)
- 30 [CMJS studies, including data files, are available here.](#)
- 31 Information and selected data from the [Jewish Community Study of New York are available here](#)
- 32 Information about [CMJS’ Birthright Israel research is available here](#)
- 33 US Census Bureau, [“Counting Every Voice: Understanding Hard-to-Count and Historically Undercounted Populations,” November 2023.](#)