

BUILDING A SEPHARDIC LIBRARY

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Description: This presentation will describe the methodologies involved in building a new Sephardic library and the philosophy behind its construct. In the face of dispersion and assimilation the Sephardic community must preserve its cultural identity as a vital entity. The American Sephardi Federation Library must assemble as many of the disparate elements of the culture as possible and then organize, catalog, and index those elements for access within the library and on the Internet. The final step is the dissemination and presentation of these items so that they can be broadcast and shared with all members of the Sephardi community. Since moving to our permanent home at the Center for Jewish History, the American Sephardi Federation Library has focused on the first two steps of collection and organization. We are also striving to disseminate the information in order to promote and perpetuate the Sephardi Jewish Heritage.

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In this paper, I shall describe some of the motivations and methods which inform the work of constructing a Sephardic Library. My task as librarian at the American Sephardi Federation (ASF) is to promote a cultural unity, while striving to preserve diversity. This is to be accomplished by bringing together the various information resources of the Sepharadim, in order to facilitate a common understanding. This task is imperative, because Sephardic culture is an endangered entity.

Identity and Diversity

Although the Sepharadim make up a large percentage of the Jews in the world, their culture, especially outside Israel has suffered from a lack of awareness and understanding. Contrary to what you might

think, the Sepharadi presence in N. America has never been overwhelmingly strong. Indeed, although they were the first group to reach N. America, even the Spanish Portuguese synagogue in N.Y. have represented only about 25% of the population for the last 200 years.

There has been a dominance of Ashkenazi culture in the Western Diaspora, producing a lack of understanding of the varied cultural and religious heritage among Sepharadim.¹

At the same time, the Sephardim themselves, have sometimes exhibited apathy about their culture. In the past, there has been a striving for Americanism, as one can see in the story reported by Stephen Birmingham, where he noted that a certain Sephardic woman:

...was gathering together her vast gift - it occupies two dozen file boxes of a number of her relatives, and other members of the Sephardic community expressed the opinion that the papers should right go to the American Jewish Historical Society"...the woman was adamant however, insisting that "the recipient should be he New York Historical Society. Since, "we are an old New York family"²

Birmingham suggests then, that such families became more pre-occupied with their relationships with the surrounding culture than with their Sephardic tradition.

The modern "Sepharadim," seem perhaps like some Israelis in that they seem to have become so occupied with survival, that they have no time for "culture." Hence we saw that the Moroccans and Yemenites, once they were magic carpeted to Israel, they immediately began to lose their sense of their unique and distinctive Sephardic culture. Attractive as this blending in might seem, the result is, that Sephardi culture is in danger of being lost.³ One senses that there has been some tendency toward assimilation, similar to that seen among the Jews in Germany prior to WWII.⁴

In building a Sepharadi library therefore, we must be mindful that while we strive to create an entity which recalls the past we also seeks to construct and preserve a Sepharadi identity. As Elizabeth Kaplan has noted in her recent article, detailing the circumstances surrounding the foundation of the AJHS, collecting archives is essentially an exercise in the construction of identity: "In the atmosphere of threat and turmoil that characterized the close of the nineteenth century, the AJHS founders turned to archives as a means by which to construct identity."⁵ In some ways, we share their goals: Our intention at ASF is to present a viable Sepharadic identity

Yet, we deviate from the intentions of founders of AJHS in two respects: 1) We are not seeking to promote a single cultural heritage, but aim to reflect the diversity of our community and 2) We are not merely striving to collect memories and passive recollections of Sephardi identity, but rather we seek to stimulate an identity for the present and the future. As Gubbay and Levy point out,

Sephardim are already beginning to take new pride in the splendid achievements of their ancestors; but time does not stand still. They will have to act now, and without delay, if they wish to preserve what was best in their history and then build a meaningful living tradition on what still survives of an unique heritage.⁶

The Sepharadim and the ASF have begun to make progress in arousing awareness regarding Sephardi heritage.

The ASF is confronted with a difficult problem, in that there are a variety of conceptions of what it means to be Sepharadi. Sepharadim may be found scattered from one end of the earth to the other, and it is often difficult for the people themselves to acknowledge the Sepharadi identity of their fellows. Whereas some Sepharadi researchers⁷ would include only those Jews who came originally from the Iberian peninsula⁸, others assert that Sepharadim can be found scattered in such remote regions as India, Iraq, and the Carribean. Gubbay and Levy have suggested, for example, that the Sepharadim include all those who trace their ancestry back to Babylonian antecedents,⁹ and thus would include many "Orientals" whom others would exclude.¹⁰

And, of course, where cultural differences do occur, some critics prefer to emphasize those distinctions over the similarities.. In a recent short article I wrote, I noted that whereas some Sepharadim do consume rice during Pesach, others regard it as strictly forbidden.¹¹ And despite my careful efforts to remain detached and magnanimous, I still received fierce criticism from some who disapproved of the consumption of rice during Pesach. Yet despite such differences in *Minhag*, Sepharadi diversity needs to be regarded as an asset rather than as a deficit. Tolerance of our conflicting *minhagim* is a positive value for the entire Jewish community, and must be promoted along with the common features of Sepharadi identity.

Sephardic Information

Sephardic material is available. As a former colleague and rabbinical friend at the Jewish Theological Seminary will readily testify, Sepharadi Rabbis have been producing Musar, Halakhah, and Responsa at an incredible rate for many years now. This material however, is not readily accessible to the average Sepharadim. Preservation and dissemination of information is too isolated. Much of it is to be found in Hebrew, and it tends to be accessible only to a few scholars, or to the followers of the rabbis responsible.

Our fundamental goal then, is to collect a wide variety of literature and media on Sephardic topics and make that information available. You may challenge this approach, asking: aren't we just collecting materials that can be found in other libraries? Perhaps, but with some major differences. To begin with, we concentrate wholly upon the collection of Sephardic material. We are, in addition, not seeking to merely preserve the books on the shelf, but we seek to retain and revive the people and the culture within those books. Thus we see cultural, anthropological material as the backbone of our collection. This material features discussions of Jews of many lands designated as Sephardic (and/or "Oriental"). We tend to be inclusive and let others exclude whom they designate.--For example, we include materials like the Hodja (or Johda) stories, which are found throughout the Middle East. Under this heading we also include music in written and recorded form, videos, cookbooks, and artwork including photographs and a small collection of artifacts to which we hope to add.

Historical Materials

We must also include, of course, historical materials. Those dealing with the Inquisition are critical. The inquisition and expulsion from Spain are focal points in the history of the Sephardim. They caused a complete, universal change in the way they viewed the world.

They were thrust into totally new environments for the first time in more than a millenium, and were forced to begin interacting with the world in an altogether different manner than they had for centuries past. From being successful professionals and business men they became refugees. Similarly, one sees that a similar phenomena occurred among European Jews following the Holocaust. This is not to say that the two events should be directly compared - the contrast across the historical distances makes such an assessment impossible. However, the point is that just as the Holocaust has acted as a stimulus prompting many Jews to begin tracing & generating studies of their history and culture so the expulsion served a similar role among Sephardim. In addition the process spawned the phenomenon of Crypto Jews which remains today a matter for study and concern.

One further means of expressing history is through historical fiction - a wide array is now being published and their claim is that they make Jewish history much more accessible. We are collecting these works despite reservations regarding the trustworthy nature of their history and the questions about the accessibility of such material in a non-lending, academic library.

Philosophical materials

We are also trying to collect a number of the significant Sepharadi philosophical works that have played such a dramatic part in the Jewish world. These include not only the prominent, traditional works by such notables as Maimonides, Nahmanides, Joseph Karo and Yehudah Halevi; but also more contemporary materials such as the *Halakhot* and *musar* writings of the Ben Ish Hai.

Religious materials

A Sephardic collection would not be complete without those materials which encompass the religious expression of the people. Unlike the Ashkenazim in the United States, the Sephardim know no distinction between Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. All of the services are Orthodox, and the Siddurim testify to this. Nevertheless, there is diversity as is reflected in our growing collection of siddurim, including items from the Syrian, Spanish Portuguese, Jerusalem, Jamaican and Greek communities (some in English for the communities here in America, others in Greek for those of first generation). In addition we have a siddur and from the Meshadi (Persian) community a group who lived for many years a Marrano like existence after forcible conversion to Islam. We also have Makhsorim from various groups, including the Moshe Lazar--classic Ladino editions (i.e., Feraro) and a very few rare books which have been donated -(one dating back to 1682). Among our Haggadot we have the standards of course, but we also possess some unusual ones, such as a replica of a Sanskrit Haggadah from the Bene Israel and one composed by the Ben Ish Hai.¹²

Serials

The ASF Library did not start with a significant budget for serials. However, I was intent upon making contact with, and establishing a link with, as many of the Sephardi communities as I possibly could, and so I have reached out to many to send us their newsletters. We have further benefited from the contributions of those supporting us, as well as through our close

affiliations with Yivo, the Genealogical Institute, etc. We have sought in this way to maintain a record of events in the Sephardi community

Organization of Information

It is of course critical that we make it accessible to the public. Our basic means of disseminating information is through research consultation, where no appointment is needed. Since our staff is limited (to one) I have thus far no representative seated in the Reading Room of the Center for Jewish History in NYC.¹³ When people come to the center with questions regarding Sepharadim, someone in the Reference area calls me and I come rushing down to help. Similarly, I try to provide a remote reference service over the phone and e-mail.

Over the e-mail for example, I received a query through Yivo from Chile, about the small Yugoslavian community of Monastir, now called Bitalo. On another occasion, I received a request from Amit Magazine about the Tunisian Sephardic community. On still another occasion, I received a query from a tourist office that wanted to know locations for synagogues in Athens, Istanbul, and Venice¹⁴. Venice was tough though, because it had no addresses, just two doors right, etc.

Turning to the technical question surrounding access to the catalog the problem up until now has been that although our libraries have the resources, the resources are frequently difficult to locate.¹⁵ The ultimate solution is to put all the databases from all the libraries into one computer catalog. For the present, however, we are each introducing individual computer databases, mainly through company called **In-Magic**. The American Sephardi Federation Library is only the second agency at the Center for Jewish History to implement such a catalog, and to establish this catalog throughout CJH. Into this catalog we are loading our collection of Sephardic books,¹⁶ cassettes, videos, and like media -- rather than merely cataloging by acquisition number, I use LC classification for these items as well. Archives are cataloged in similar manner.

Genealogical Materials

We seek, however, to build an institution which will not only serve as a depository for books and tapes, but it will also breed new life into the Sephardic Community. This we hope to achieve, by building around the lives, i.e., the genealogical records and oral histories of our patrons. Genealogy has long played a significant role among the Sephardim in the United States. So it was with one of our patrons, Morris Tarragano, who not only contributed his genealogy, but also donated a portion of his oral history in his Ladino-English Bar Mitzvah Speech from 1934. This is being supplemented by a number of monographs (perhaps a dozen or so) sent to us from patrons and the Genealogical Institute at the Center for Jewish History, thanks to Dr. Rachel Fisher.¹⁷ ASF library is now taking steps to compile a genealogical database, based on the membership application.¹⁸ Building on the back of the Genealogical database, we are also compiling a database for those seeking restitution in Arab lands. We are frequently told of the Arab refugees from Israel, but the American Sephardi Federation seeks to make known that there were hundreds of thousands of Jews who were driven out of Arab lands following Israel's independence in 1948. One patron included with her genealogy and restitution report her oral history describing her family's experiences

Conclusion:

This paper has outlined the main activities of the ASF library at present. We continue to grow through generous donations and loans of material from individuals and institutions. There is much work ahead of us as we work to preserve and stimulate our unique heritage.

Endnotes

1. The Phoenix Sephardic community is a case in point. Phoenix communities appeared to contain no Sepharadim. We visited at Shavuot and found the Moroccan Sepharadim trying to organize the Sephardic organization of Phoenix. Recently spoke with a rabbi from Tuscon who said there was not only a Sephardic community, but also a Bukharian community which we also include among the Sepharadim.
2. Stephen Birmingham, *The Grandees*, p.17.
3. Hopefully my fears are unfounded. In Israel there are a number of organizations seeking to invigorate and promote the Sephardic heritage. In the New York/New Jersey area a number of congregations and yeshivot strive to maintain and promote their unique heritage. The task of the American Sephardi Federation is to support, publicize and unify the efforts that these groups are making individually.--The role of the library, moreover, is to act as a resource not merely for students of the past, but also, for the active (not passive) stimulation of the cultural future.
4. I am sometimes haunted by the nightmare that Sepharadim are now confronted with a scenario similar to that of a century ago, when scholars took up the scientific study of Judaism (Wissenschaft Judentums) as they anticipated its demise.
5. Elizabeth Kaplan. "We are what we collect, we collect what we are: Archives and the construction of identity." *The American Archivist*. 63 Spring/Summer 2000. p.150.
6. L. Gubbay and A. Levy. *The Sephardim : Their glorious tradition from the Babylonian Exile to the Present Day*. London : Carnell Ltd, 1992. p.10.
7. Yale Strom. *The expulsion of the Jews: Five hundred years of Exodus*. New York : S.P.I. Books, 1992. p.8.
8. Such researchers would even exclude the Italian Sepharadim as an entity unto themselves, since their earliest antecedents did not come originally from the Iberian peninsula. Loc. cit.
9. L. Gubbay and A. Levy. *The Sephardim : Their glorious tradition from the Babylonian Exile to the Present Day*. London : Carnell Ltd, 1992. p.10.
10. Indeed, in the May, 2001 issue of *Sephardic Image*, one reads of new efforts to train Indian Jews in a Sephardic Center in Israel, & then sending them back to disseminate information in India."SSC graduate goes to Bombay." *Sephardic Image*. vol.12, no.5; May, 2001. p.182.
11. Randall C. Belinfante. "Rice is nice, but on Passover too? *Sephardim Today*. Spring, 2001. p.2.

12. Which though published in 1993, still hasn't appeared in RLIN or OCLC (How I wish I was still creating records for credit).

13. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the Center, it is made up of five institutions (4 libraries and YUM) as well as Genealogical Institute.

14. Venice was tough though, because there were no addresses, just directions – 2 doors down on the right etc.

15. I spoke of an example of a book which I knew I had at home, but which I had to ask three librarians for before I was able to locate it at CJH.

16. These I cataloged with LC call number, but originally tried to arrange them regionally. The foolhardiness of this tactic became apparent however, as soon as I was out of the office for a few days. The Yivo reference librarians who were the only ones with access to my stacks didn't know my system, so I had to go back to LC. I've also employed a rather unorthodox program for cataloging religious items. I was dissatisfied with traditional LC system of utilizing Z and numerous numbers for these materials, so I have added a number of other cutters. I start with the standard LC call number, BM675.N5 or P4. I distinguish it as Sephardi materials by adding an S3. Then I distinguish it by creating a cutter based on uniform author or title, just as one does with other works.

17. Some of the resources available for pursuing genealogical information include Dutch records (ketubot indexes, civil records and the Center voor Genealogie) Greek records and Holocaust records.

18. This is not as easy as it sounds – sometimes people are reluctant to be completely forthcoming. Taking a Sephardi spouse from outside your immediate community was perhaps not something you wanted to broadcast.