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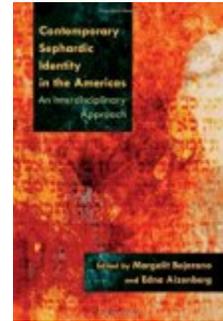
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Margalit Bejarano, Edna Aizenberg, eds. *Contemporary Sephardic Identity in the Americas: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012. 272 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3272-6.

Reviewed by Diane Matza (Utica College)

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Affirming Continuity

Contemporary Sephardic Identity in the Americas: An Interdisciplinary Approach, the volume under review, is a stimulating collection of eleven articles variously employing historical, literary, and cultural analysis to explore the ethno-religious identity of non-Western Jewish communities in Latin America, New York, and Quebec. The scholarship is uniformly solid and free of jargon, making the collection accessible to lay and scholarly audiences, and the contributors are without exception experts in the field. It is a valuable reference work for a university library and a worthwhile textbook for a course in Sephardic studies of the modern period.

The book's introduction sets out a broad definition of Sephardic, one commonly used by scholars, despite its acknowledged imprecision, to include all Jews who are not Ashkenazi. The introduction also outlines both content and purpose, to address the "paucity of publications on the Sephardic experience in the American Continent—North and South—during the last one hundred years" (p. xii). Exclusion of the Sephardic experience from American Jewish historiography has long been a source of motivation and inspiration for scholars in the United States—Marc Angel, Joseph Papo, Joseph Setton, Aviva Ben Ur, and others—whose work highlights the rich primary source material available about the Greek-, Spanish-, and Arabic-speaking Jewish communities across the United States. They have spurred a shift from the larger field's emphasis on studies of the Ashkenazi world to a more multicultural approach. *Sephardic Identity in the Ameri-*

cas, an Interdisciplinary Approach, with the imprimatur of a 2005 colloquium at Hebrew University, signals a similar determination to bring Sephardim in North and South America in from the margins.

The eleven articles collected by editors Margalit Bejarano and Edna Aizenberg focus on wide-ranging effects of Sephardic transnational consciousness on the Jewish communities they built in the Americas. It also charts a course for additional research. Readers will find Henry A. Green's claim that the Jewish community of South Florida is "a researcher's delight" (p. 127) to be equally true of the Syrians in New York and Argentina, the Moroccans of Quebec, the Balkan Jews of Mexico, and so on.

Each of the three articles in part 1, "Sephardim in the Americas: Community and Culture," examines community transition in the face of shifting political, economic, and social forces, both external and internal. Margalit Bejarano's "The Sephardic Communities of Latin America" opens the anthology. Its goal, to establish a context for many of the other articles in the book, makes it the most wide-ranging piece geographically and historically. Its subject is the Jews of South America, Cuba, and Mexico, beginning with settlements of crypto-Jews in the Spanish colonies and ending with the most recent migrations of Jews from the Middle East. Bejarano trains her eye primarily on how old-world patterns of belief and behavior collide with new realities, shaking up and transforming economic, communal, and religious adjustment.

Edna Aizenberg's lively "Nuevos mundos hallo Colon, or What's Different about Sephardic Literature in the Americas?" sets Sephardi writers in the complex milieu Bejarano describes. She examines South American Jewish writers' evolving attitudes toward the Spanish language, teasing out alternately "utopian" and "dystopian" literary tropes that emerge as the Sephardim's distinctive cultural heritage meets host country. Jane Gerber's article, like Bejarano's, reviews social and economic adjustment and cultural transmission, now of the Greek-, Ladino-, and Arabic-speaking Jews of New York. Gerber transforms this familiar information into an original contribution by comparing Balkan and Syrian Jewry's success in maintaining coherent communities—dramatically different success rooted in the Balkan Jews' intra-group national diversity and the Syrians' fierce independence from mainstream Jewish institutions and reliance on their own religious leaders.

Part 2, "Ideological Divergence," the longest section of the book, investigates intra-group relations, tracing how consciousness of transnationalism—consciousness rather than practice, for these Jews do not travel back and forth between their various homelands—orders immigrant and subsequent generations' alternately confident or anxious ethno-religious identity. We find in these articles little explicit discussion of encounters with the non-Jewish community, another area for additional research. Instead, examination of the mind-set with which Sephardi Jews contemplated assimilation and adherence to tradition predominates. Raanan Rein and Molly Lewis Nouwen focus on the Argentine newspaper *Israel*, with its fifty-year history as a vehicle for Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews to unite around Zionism, not as a political belief but as a source of Jewish belonging to a distant and perhaps idealized homeland. The authors' challenge to prevailing conceptions of a significant Ashkenazi-Sephardi divide is certainly worth further study. Susanna Brauer's subject is religious revival, post-WWII to the nineties, among Syrian Jews, well known for maintaining the most cohesive Jewish communities in the diaspora. Brauer zeroes in on the differences in religious observance among the Damascenes and Aleppans, noting increasing ritualistic rigidification among the Aleppans as they turn toward identification with the ultra-Orthodox. Brauer doesn't dwell on the resulting dehistoricization of the Syrian experience, but those interested in this issue may want to read Shari Jacobsen's *American Anthropology* article from June, 2006, "Modernity, Conservative Religious Movements, and the Female Subject," which notes how the turn to ultra-Orthodoxy has affected Syrian Jew-

ish food culture. Liz Hamui Halabe writes a comparative four-generation study of the Mexican Sephardim's numerous small communities. Established according to country of origin, the communities' local differences shaped levels of piety as well as attitudes toward social and economic integration with the host country. Although Halabe records some conflict among the different groups, especially in regard to strictness of religious observance, she also notes a largely traditionalist stance among them, which encourages devotion to Jewish communal institutions and to Jewish family values. Henry A. Green's piece on the Miami Sephardim traces how a small group of Jews whose anxious adjustment was shaped by an overwhelming sense of their minority-within-a-minority status, developed into a large, ethnically diverse group confident in its Jewish and Hispanic identity. These identities, deeply intertwined but also separable, are revealed in their synagogue- rather than Jewish communal-centric behaviors and relationships with the larger Hispanic population. Green ends by asserting that the Sephardim function "as a bridge into the non-Jewish Hispanic community and have repeatedly used their political capital to gain support for Israel and American Jewish causes" (p. 140). This is a provocative piece, raising issues about the Sephardim's attitude about linguistic continuity, their relationship to the Spanish-language press, and the dynamics of inter-group cooperation—many matters for more follow-up studies.

Language, literature, and music are three hearts of the Sephardim's centuries-old culture, and the connection among them is the subject of part 3. Like the rest of the anthology, the three articles in this section investigate strategies to affirm continuity. All three explore undercurrents of tension within the arts: how nostalgia for a distant past and preservation consciousness compete with or influence creative revitalization, how preoccupation with authenticity may stymie cultural production. A fascinating development, discussed in Monique Balbuena's "Ladino in Latin America," is the Ashkenazi poet Juan Gelman's use of Ladino instead of Spanish partly as political protest. Other writers Balbuena critiques are aware of the sentimentality trap in Ladino's use primarily as a marker of loss, as many of them have transformed Ladino into an emblem of assertiveness about identity and belonging. Yael Halevi Wise mixes close textual analysis and cultural criticism in her discussion of Rosa Nissan's two popular novels, *Novia que te vea* (1992) and *Hisho que te nacza* (1996). Placing Nissan's work for the first time in a larger context of women's ethnic and autobiographical writing, Wise shows how Ladino,

interspersed with Spanish, bridges the gap between the protagonist's Jewish and Mexican identities and also imbues attitudes toward gender with historical and cultural specificity. The final essay, highlights the richness of transnational identity in cultural production, ending on a wistful note with Judith Cohen's work on the fragility of the Sephardic musical traditions in Quebec and challenges to preservation. The piece catalogs musical style, content, and purpose, but Cohen does more than the expected work of a musical anthropologist by allowing her informants to speak as individuals.

The book treats multiple topics with different methods, but it is held together by a central theme: the shaping of religious, ethnic, and cultural continuity among Sephardim across the Americas. The authors examine

patterns of intra-group coexistence, showing how the Sephardim have refined and redefined their identity and revitalized cultural expression in accord with new migrations and a shifting historical landscape. Although outside the scope of this anthology, additional questions both broad and particular are raised by it. What, for example, has been the role of Jewish education in sustaining Sephardim in the Americas? And how has ultra-Orthodox influence reshaped the religious texts young Syrian Jews study in the yeshiva? Readers will also be curious about the Sephardim's social, business, and political encounters with non-Jews, and with the home country's secular institutions or state politics. These, too, are subjects worthy of additional research, and the studies in *Contemporary Sephardic Identity in the Americas* are models to follow.

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