

Adriana M. Brodsky. *Sephardi, Jewish, Argentine: Community and National Identity*. Indiana Series in Sephardi and Mizrahi Studies. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016. xiv + 281 pp. \$32.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-253-02303-2.

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Argentina, with the largest Jewish population in Latin America, represents a meeting point between a dominant Ashkenazi sector from eastern Europe; Ashkenazim from central and western Europe; and Sephardim from Morocco, Syria (mainly Aleppo and Damascus), Turkey, Rhodes, and the Balkans. While numerically the Sephardim were always considered a minority in the Jewish community, in the last forty years their visibility has been growing. In addition to the role that Sephardic figures play in the Argentine, Jewish, and Zionist arenas, the legacy of Sefarad is becoming part of the universal culture.

Sephardic communal institutions in Argentina, like those of other Latin American countries, were founded on the basis of geographic and linguistic origins. Over more than one hundred years of coexistence with other Jewish and gentile groups, identities were transformed and dividing boundaries were partly blurred, but the communal organizations still maintain the original sub-ethnic frameworks created by the early immigrants. Social and cultural differences between the Sephardic subgroups were influenced by processes that started in the home communities, such as the degree of modernity/secularism versus conservatism/orthodoxy, or attitudes toward Zionism. Thus the descendants of Ladino speakers and Mo-

roccans tend to be more lax with their religious observance and are more apt to marry outside their group (with Ashkenazim or gentiles). Aleppans and Damascenes have a strong orthodox core that protects their ethnic boundaries as an integral part of their Jewishness but are threatened by the large periphery of nonobservant persons as well as by the nonethnic ultra-Orthodox movements.

While studies on Argentine Jews are abundant, only a few scholars have dedicated their research to the Sephardim, and most of them have concentrated on a specific sector.[1] Adriana M. Brodsky's book is the first comprehensive study on Argentina's Sephardim, covering their history from 1880 to 1960 not only in Buenos Aires but also in the provinces. It is based on an impressive amount of records, such as minute books, various archival sources, newspapers, oral histories, and literary sources.

In the introduction the author presents the main objectives of her study: to demonstrate how Sephardim became Argentines; how they struggled for visibility with respect to the Ashkenazi majority; and how they constructed their ethnic, national, and diasporic identities. She distinguishes between a common Sephardi identity—shared by all the Jews from the Middle East

and North Africa—and the particular sub-ethnic identities based on the communities of origin, nurtured by ties with transnational Sephardi institutions and leaders in Palestine (and later Israel) as well as in the home communities. Brodsky emphasizes the impact of the changing Argentinian context on the consolidation of the national identity of the Sephardim. In this she aims to contribute to a debate between scholars who stress the Jewish experience in Latin America and those who focus on Jews as an ethnic group within their national context.[2] In a synthesis between the two approaches, she concludes that the findings of the book “strongly suggest that diasporic identities and ethno-national loyalties and identifications reinforced each other, came into conflict with each other, and coexisted with each other at different points in time and over various issues” (pp. 8-9).

The first chapter of the book is a detailed history of Jewish cemeteries, and uses the walls around the burial grounds as a metaphor for the divisions between communities. The stories of the purchase of burial grounds serve as lenses that reflect the relations of Jewish immigrants with their religious traditions, with Argentine realities, and with different circumstances in each city. Above all they reflect the impact of ethnic origin on the consolidation of communal infrastructures that depended on the ownership of cemeteries.

The second chapter deals with the role of philanthropy in the process of constructing communal identity and ethnic boundaries. The author demonstrates that in addition to the religious and social tradition of beneficence, Jews were influenced by circumstances in Argentina, where welfare services were not provided by the state and immigrant colonies had to establish their own health, education, and social institutions. Thus Jewish charities acted in a double role of continuity and integration.

The third chapter analyzes the unsuccessful attempts to create a Sephardi roof organization. In the religious sphere, the attempt to establish a

centralized rabbinical entity in the 1920s failed because of differences in tradition and mentality, and opposition to the lay leaders who controlled religious life. In the field of Zionism, Sephardim succeeded to overcome sub-ethnic divisions, and created a united front to help the creation of a Jewish state. In general Jewish matters, such as antisemitism, the Sephardim were part of the *Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas* (DAIA), the Jewish roof organization. Brodsky concludes that the issues that united the Sephardim were not strong enough to create a single organization.

The fourth chapter analyzes Zionism as a common space for all Sephardic groups that did not share the ideological party divisions of Ashkenazic Jews and the use of Yiddish. Brodsky argues that the reconfiguration of the Zionist Sephardic identity was tied with a redefinition of their Argentine identity. The Sephardim used Zionist projects to ensure their visibility and to legitimize their separate identity. They requested that their contributions be recognized as Sephardic and Argentine and be directed to Sephardim in Eretz Israel.

The fifth chapter is devoted to the identity of Jewish women as Argentine, Jewish, and Sephardi. The author points out that Sephardi women adapted social norms and customs of the hegemonic feminist classes for social events that combined fundraising with philanthropy. She concludes that prestigious Argentine spaces were used to acquire visibility and to preserve Jewish and Sephardi continuity.

Brodsky pays special attention to the role of Sephardi women in the Women's International Zionist Organization and states that their interaction with Ashkenazi women canceled their differences of origin. She also points to the relations between food and identity: culinary traditions preserved ethnicity and symbolized the religious past, but food was also a meeting point with other ethnic traditions and with Argentine cuisine.

The sixth and last chapter deals with marriages and schools. Brodsky demonstrates that Sephardim protected the boundaries of their own sub-ethnic communities by marrying inside their group of origin. Gradually, however, they adopted modern norms, moved to other social spaces, and looked for their spouses also in other Jewish sub-ethnic groups and among non-Jews. Brodsky argues that Sephardic religious schools were instrumental in assisting immigrants to become Argentines but fails to mention that they were complementary institutions, and that Sephardi children received their education in public schools. She stresses the cordial relations with municipal and government institutions and the adoption of national symbols and “patriotic themes” that were incorporated in the curricula not only because of the government’s policy to assimilate the immigrants but also due to the identification of Jews with their new homeland.

The book concludes with a postscript that adds a more recent perspective to the study. The author presents the reaction of Argentine society to the bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) building in July 1994—“we are all Jews” (p. 206)—as evidence that the Jewish presence became an integral part of the nation. She also mentions that DAIA’s president at the time was a member of the Aleppan community, proving that Sephardim were perceived as part of the whole Jewish community at large. The book thus follows the gradual integration of the Sephardim into Argentine society and into the Jewish community at large in a long process of change of boundaries and identities.

Brodsky presents to the reader a complex mosaic of multiple identities and changing realities. Her book is an important contribution to the Jewish bookcase that lacks studies on Sephardim in the Americas. Her focus on the impact of the Argentine context on the Sephardi identity overshadows social and cultural differences between the sub-ethnic groups. Nevertheless, it is an essential

textbook on Sephardi institutional history as well as a case study that should be compared to other minorities and other national contexts.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, María Cherro de Azar and Walter Duer, *Agudat Dodim 100 años: La historia de nuestra institución* (Buenos Aires: Agudat Dodim, 2014); Susana Brauner, *Ortodoxia religiosa y pragmatismo político: Los judíos de origen Sirio* (Buenos Aires: Lumiere, 2009); Susana Rodgers, *Los judíos de Alepo en Argentina: Identidad y organización comunitaria, 1900-2000* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Nuevos Tiempos, 2005); Diana Epstein, “Los judeo-marroquíes en Buenos Aires: Pautas matrimoniales,” *Estudios Interdisciplinarios de América Latina y el Caribe* 6, no. 1 (1995): 113-33; Iaacov Rubel et al., *Presencia sefaradí en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Centro Educativo Sefaradí para Latinoamérica, 1992); and Victor A. Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930: In Search of Identity* (Detroit, MI: Wayne University Press, 1990).

[2]. Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein criticize the many works of Haim Avni and the “Jerusalem school” as focusing on the Jewishness of Latin American Jews. See, for example, Jeffrey Lesser and Raanan Rein, eds., *Rethinking Jewish-Latin Americans* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008); and Raanan Rein, *Argentine Jews or Jewish Argentines: Essays on Ethnicity, Identity, and Diaspora* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). For a general survey of historiography on this subject, see Judit Bokser Liwerant et al., introduction to *Pertenencia y alteridad: Judíos en/de América Latina; Cuarenta años de cambios*, ed. Haim Avni et al. (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2011), 46-83.

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