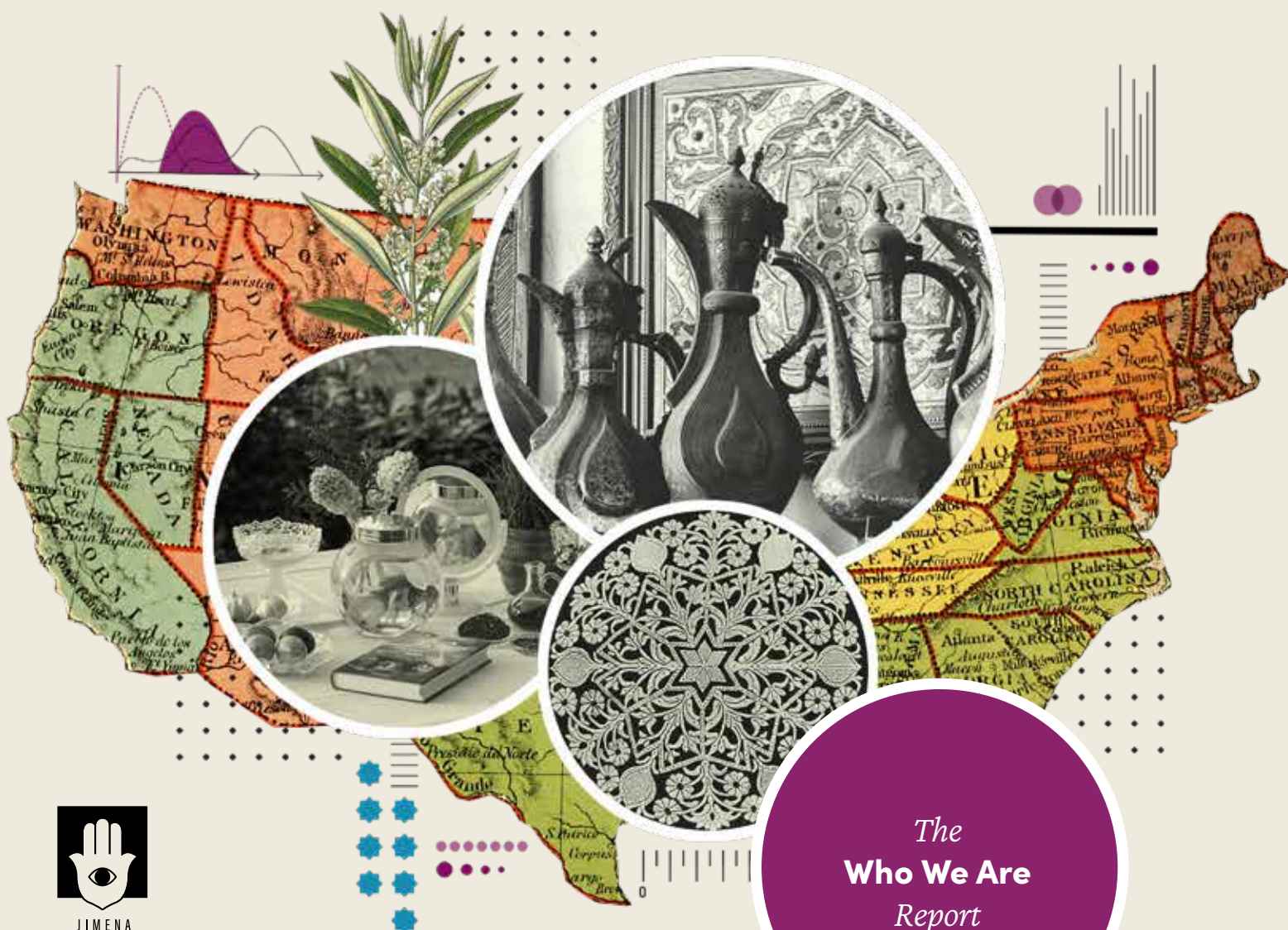


# Sephardic & Mizrahi Jews in the United States:

**IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES, AND COMMUNITIES**



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**

THE  
**Who We Are**  
REPORT

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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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THE  
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**Methodology**  
REPORT



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**Full Report**



# 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.

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**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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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.

<b>Ty Alhadeff</b> , Director of Education, JIMENA	<b>Manashe Khaimov</b> , Founder and CEO, Sephardic American Mizrahi Initiative (SAMi)	<b>Moji Pourmoradi</b> , Former Director of the Holocaust Memorial and Tolerance Center and Jewish Educator
<b>Brigitte Dayan</b> , Community Leader, NYC	<b>Rabbi Meyer Laniado</b> , Associate Rabbi, Congregation Kehilath Jeshurun	<b>Sara Rosenfeld</b> , Head of School, Barkai Yeshivah
<b>Adam Eilath</b> , Head of School, Wornick Jewish Day School	<b>Ethan Marcus</b> , Managing Director, Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America	<b>Rabbi Joey Soffer</b> , Rabbi, Congregation Beth Torah; Rosh Bet Midrash, Barkai Yeshivah High School
<b>Rina Kattan Cohen</b> , Manager of Community Organizing & External Relations, UJA Federation		

## 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.