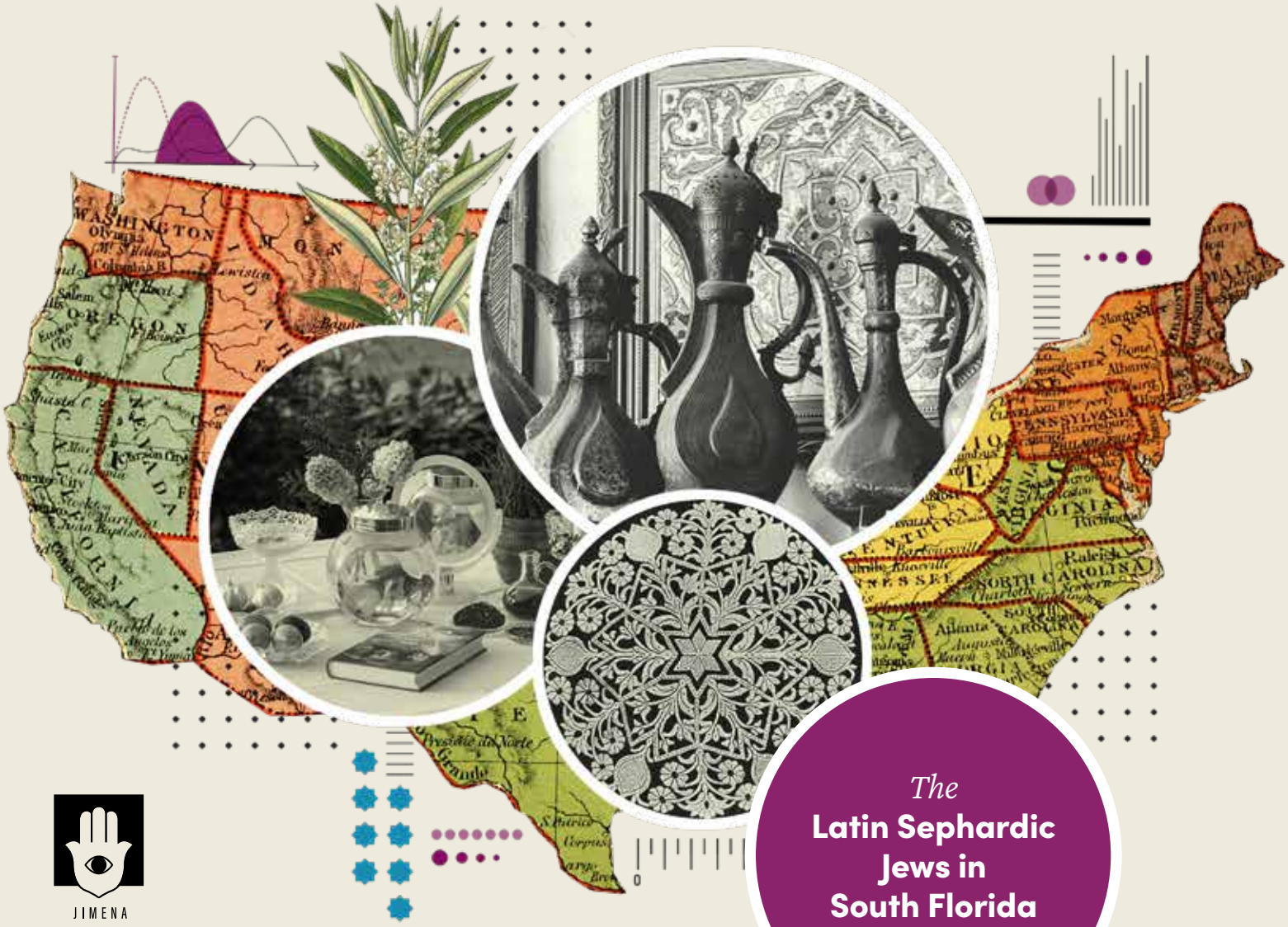
Sephardic & Mizrahi Jews in the United States:

IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES, AND COMMUNITIES



The
Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida
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

THE

Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida

REPORT

Table of Contents

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 U.S., 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.

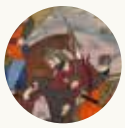
List of Reports:

THE
Who We Are
REPORT

THE
Research Approach
REPORT

THE
Summary of Findings
REPORT

THE
Recommendations
REPORT



THE
Understanding Sephardic & Mizrahi Identity
REPORT

THE
National Demographic Profile
REPORT

THE
Community Portraits
REPORT

THE
Syrian Jews in Brooklyn
REPORT

THE
Persian Jews in Los Angeles
REPORT

THE
Bukharian Jews in Queens
REPORT

THE
Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida
REPORT

THE
Methodology
REPORT

THE
Full Report

Latin Sephardic Community Portrait (South Florida)

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.

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.

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.

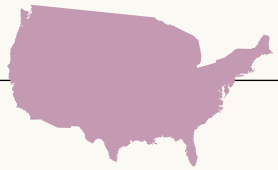
MULTI-STEP MIGRATION PATHS OF LATIN SEPHARDIC JEWS IN SOUTH FLORIDA

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.

SECTION 2.

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 you[1] 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."*

JEWS OF COLOR

Jews of color is a relatively new category that has become popular with American Jewish institutions in an

“

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 possible divisive among the larger Jewish population. As Ben, a 31-year-old manof Syrian descent, born in the US to Columbian 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.

SECTION 3.

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.

> **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.

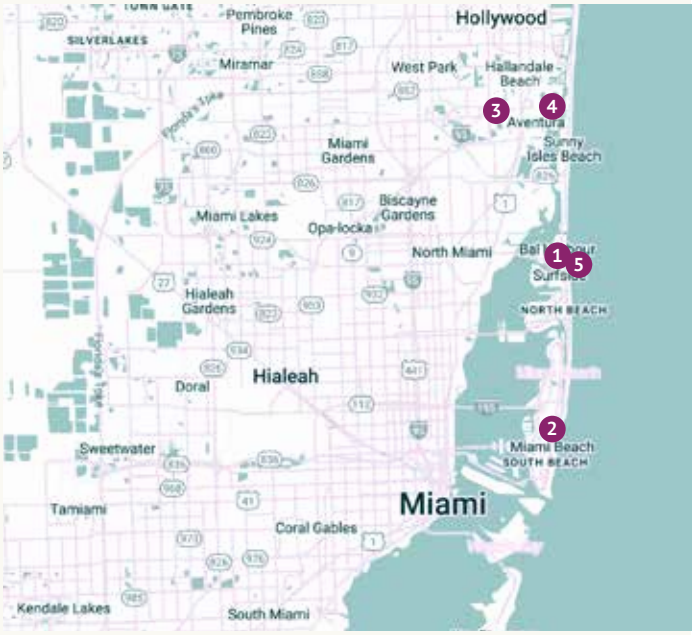
Politics

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 outsize 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.

SECTION 4.

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 minyans—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.

Borekas:

Flaky, stuffed pastries of Turkish and Sephardic origin, often filled with cheese, potato, spinach, or meat. Traditionally made with phyllo or puff pastry, borekas 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 sutlach (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.

Wakshallu:
(Haketia) nostalgic.

Mashallah:
(Arabic) God has willed it, used to express admiration.

NOTES

1 "You" refers to interviewer, who is a fair skinned, light-eyed woman of Ashkenazi descent.