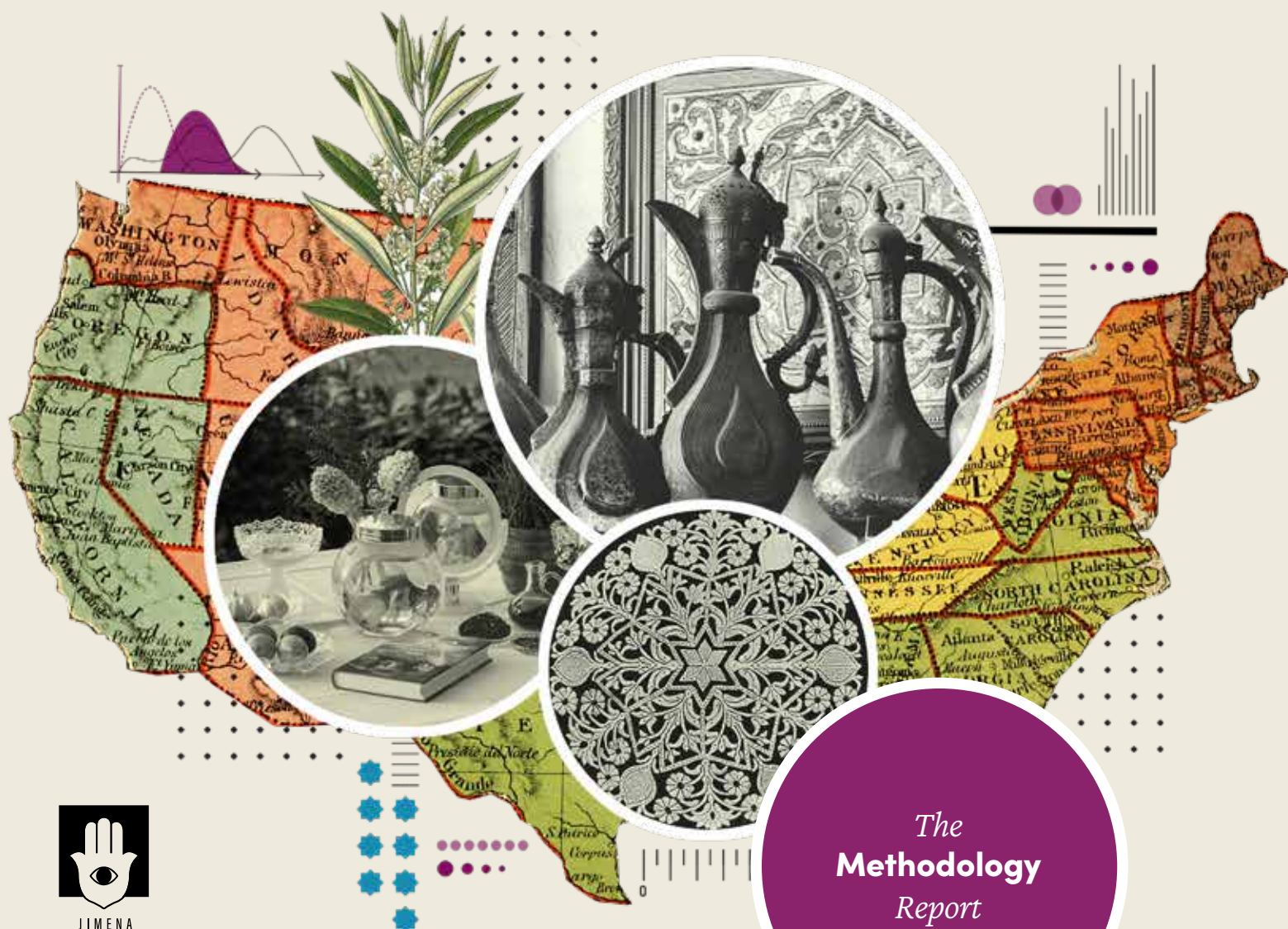


Sephardic & Mizrahi Jews in the United States:

IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES, AND COMMUNITIES



Commissioned by
**JIMENA: JEWS INDIGENOUS
TO THE MIDDLE EAST AND
NORTH AFRICA**

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NYU

ROBERT F. WAGNER GRADUATE
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC SERVICE



NYU

BRONFMAN

AUGUST 2025

THE
Methodology
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
Who We Are
REPORT



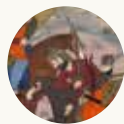
THE
Research Approach
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THE
Summary of Findings
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THE
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THE
Understanding Sephardic & Mizrahi Identity
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THE
National Demographic Profile
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THE
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THE
Syrian Jews in Brooklyn
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THE
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THE
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THE
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DEFINITIONS

To ground our work, we began by employing expansive definitions of Sephardic and Mizrahi identity, incorporating the broadest interpretations of these groups. This included Jews who trace their lineage to the Iberian Peninsula (today Spain and Portugal), as well as Jews who come from, or are the descendants of those who come from, the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Middle East. We also included populations whose primary identity is organized around a different local identifier, such as Bukharian Jews, but who identify as Sephardic in their approach to Jewish law and custom. This definition guided our literature review, analysis, and overall research approach.

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD OVERSIGHT

This research project was approved by New York University's Institutional Review Board, IRB-FY2023-7177.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We researched and wrote four in-depth white papers as part of a literature review to inform our work. Though not reproduced in their entirety, Section 2 of this report (Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States) incorporates materials from them. The white papers included a detailed review of academic research on Sephardic Jews in the United States, where we explored key trends, identified gaps, and examined what this body of work reveals about the field—or its lack of formal organization—when it comes to contemporary Sephardic Jews. We also created a comprehensive narrative history compiling what is currently known about

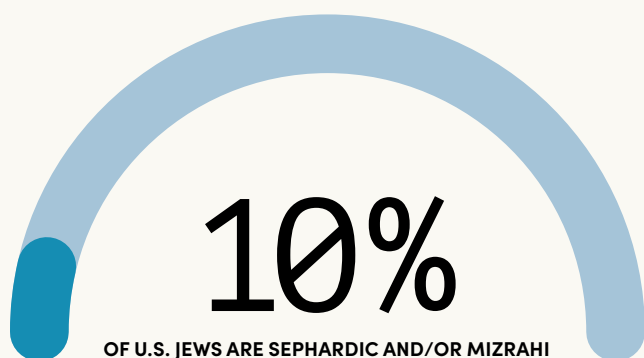
Sephardic Jews in the US, providing critical context and continuity. Another paper focused on the histories and nuances of Sephardic and Mizrahi identity categories, delving into their evolution and the complexities surrounding their use. Finally, we wrote an analysis of how race and ethnicity intersect with Sephardic and Mizrahi identities, considering the historical and contemporary dynamics shaping these discussions.¹

QUANTITATIVE METHODOLOGY

Our quantitative estimates were produced by researchers at the Cohen CMJS at Brandeis University. They did not collect new data but instead analyzed recent national and communal surveys, including the Pew Research Center's 2020 survey of US Jews;² seven local Jewish community surveys conducted by CMJS for Jewish Federations in Chicago (2020), Los Angeles (2021), Greater MetroWest, NJ (2020), Kansas City (2021), Long Beach, CA (2021–22), Louisville (2021–22), and Delaware (2022);³ the Jewish Community Study of New York (2023) conducted by SSRS for the UJA Federation of New York;⁴ and surveys of Birthright Israel applicants in 2020, 2021, and 2022 conducted by CMJS.⁵

The Pew Center's public-use data file does not have geographic data at the state or metro levels. Therefore, at CMJS' request, Pew Research Center provided estimates of the Sephardic and Mizrahi populations in the eight local Jewish communities and transmitted those to CMJS for further analysis. UJA Federation of New York provided CMJS with estimates of the Sephardic/Mizrahi population from the 2023 Jewish Community of New York. Neither the Pew Research Center, UJA Federation of New York, nor SSRS bear any responsibility for the analyses presented here.

We made deliberate choices in determining our



estimates of the share of US Jewish adults who are Sephardic and/or Mizrahi. We employed a lower-bound, baseline estimate of 7% from the 2020 Pew Research Center 2020 survey and then upward-adjusted estimates of 8%, 10%, and 11% based on the eight local community studies for which there is data on Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. CMJS's methods for adjusting the Pew baseline estimate are detailed in Section 3 of the report. From among the upward-adjusted estimates, we selected 10% as our estimate of the Sephardic and Mizrahi population in the US. We believe this estimate is reasonable with the available data and with the well-documented lower survey response rates among immigrants, ethnic minorities, and non-English speakers,⁶ which then tend to result in undercounts of these groups.

In addition to generating estimates of the size of the Sephardic and Mizrahi populations, CMJS analyzed data from its seven community studies and the New York Jewish community study to examine socio-demographic and Jewish characteristics of Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi respondents. CMJS used Birthright Israel applicant data selectively in their analysis and we report them selectively, too. This is because Birthright applicants are not representative of the American Jewish community, of the eligible age cohort, or of a particular geographic locale. Findings reported by the Birthright applicants are included for context and not direct comparison.

QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

We selected four communities that we determined fit within the Sephardic/Mizrahi category and were shaped by the US 1965 immigration reforms that significantly increased immigration from regions including Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The four communities were

the Syrian community in Brooklyn, NY; the Bukharian community in Queens, NY; the Persian community in Los Angeles; and the Latin Sephardic population hub in South Florida. Through this community portrait lens, we gained valuable insights into ethnic enclaves and communities shaped by structural ethnicity, particularly those with origins in Muslim-majority countries.

Instrumentation

The researchers developed an interview protocol that covered a variety of topics, including basic demographic information; the meaning of ethnic, racial, and religious categories; community and belonging; social networks and boundaries; and relationships with Ashkenazi Jews and institutions. The protocols were reviewed by the project's academic advisors and by select community informants before it was finalized.

Data collection

Our qualitative data was gathered primarily through 1-hour interviews via Zoom, supplemented by in-person interviews. We also conducted site visits in each community to institutions and homes and observations in public spaces. Our research team included those fluent in Spanish, English, Hebrew, Persian, and Russian to accommodate linguistic diversity. More specifically:

1. The Persian community portrait was based on 44 interviews conducted primarily by Dr. Ilana Horwitz specifically for this study, with additional contributions from Lerone Edalati, who conducted some interviews, including in Persian.
2. The Bukharian community portrait was based on 40 interviews conducted primarily by Dr. Elana Riback Rand specifically for this study. A Russian-speaking translator was available and offered to interviewees, but none requested the translator's services.
3. The Latin Sephardic community portrait was based on 28 interviews conducted primarily by Dr. Laura Limonic during this study in both English and Spanish, supplemented with data from Dr. Limonic's broader research on Latin Jews across the US.

4. The Syrian community portrait was based on 10 interviews conducted primarily by Dr. Elana Riback Rand, supplemented by a secondary analysis of data from more than 100 interviews with Syrian Jews conducted as part of Dr. Bitton’s doctoral research.

As Research Director, Dr. Mijal Bitton conducted interviews across all four communities to provide a shared bridge and identify themes that emerged throughout the study.

Sampling and recruitment

In total, we conducted 122 interviews across these four community portraits. Our interviewees included 64 women, 57 men, and one non-binary individual, and represented a diverse range of ages: 16 in their 20s, 45 in their 30s, 22 in their 40s, 12 in their 50s, 21 in their 60s, 5 in their 70s, and 2 in their 80s.

We used a snowball sampling method to identify interview subjects, leveraging social media, listservs, and outreach to institutions and community gatekeepers. Some communities were easier to access than others, and we consistently encountered a “trust gap.” If there was a personal connection to one of the researchers (i.e., a community leader or friend vouched for us) then there was greater openness to be interviewed. Where we had more connections, we had a much easier time establishing trust and gaining access. Personal connections often proved more effective than credentials in securing interviews. Relationships with community insiders and the reputations of team members in these communities were instrumental in gaining access.

We recognize that the individuals we reached most easily often shared certain characteristics—typically younger and with more secular education. In some communities, accessing Haredi segments and those in lower socio-economic strata proved more challenging.

Community	Gender	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s
Syrian Jewish Community In NY	3F, 7M	0	1	5	1	2	0	1
Bukharian Community in Queens	22F, 18 M	7	15	10	1	4	2	1
Persian Jewish Community in LA	24F, 19M, 1 non-binary	9	14	4	6	10	1	0
Latin Sephardic Community in South Florida	15F, 13M	0	14	3	4	5	2	0
Total	64 women, 57 men, and one non- binary individual	16	45	22	12	21	5	2

To mitigate this sampling unevenness, we sought input from community members who represented broader diversity. For example, when the LA portrait was primarily shaped by data from young Persian Jews in their 30s, we had Persian Jews from older age brackets review it to ensure a more balanced perspective. As part of our triangulation approach (see below), we sent out the portrait for review, incorporating feedback to refine and enhance the accuracy of our findings.

The interviews for this research were conducted confidentially, with identifying details removed or altered to protect participants' privacy. Informed consent was obtained, and all data was anonymized to ensure confidentiality. The names in this report are pseudonyms.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and systematically coded for analysis. The coding scheme was developed jointly by the researchers. Research assistants coded the interviews.

Triangulation approach

Our study employed multiple forms of triangulation to ensure the validity, reliability, and depth of our qualitative data:

1. Diverse Perspectives

- We actively sought to capture a range of perspectives by engaging both institutional leaders and broader community members within each community.
- To further validate our findings, we ensured 3-4 individuals from each community, including institutional leaders, reviewed and provided feedback on complete draft of their community portrait.

2. Collaborative Research Team

Our team consisted of five researchers who collected qualitative data, four researchers who analyzed the data, and research assistants who supported the coding process. This collaborative effort allowed us to incorporate multiple viewpoints and interpretations, minimizing individual biases.

3. Contextual Triangulation

We used a variety of contexts to gather data, including interviews, site visits to homes and institutions, and observations in public spaces. This approach enabled us to understand community dynamics in diverse settings and identify consistent themes across contexts.

4. Practitioner Feedback

During the development of practitioner recommendations, we shared our report—including community portraits—with a diverse group of Sephardic practitioners across the United States, many of whom were from the communities profiled in our study. Their perspectives served as an additional layer of data triangulation, helping to refine and contextualize our analysis and recommendations.

By employing these triangulation methods, we ensured that our research findings were well-rounded, credible, and reflective of the complexities within the communities we studied. This multi-faceted approach strengthened the rigor and applicability of our study.



Selected Works Consulted

This appendix provides a list of selected works consulted during the research for this study. It is provided for readers who wish to learn more about Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews and related topics referenced in the report. It is not an exhaustive list of all works the research team consulted in preparing this report.

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NOTES

- 1 The research team hopes to expand on these white papers and publish them independently at a future date.
- 2 The data file from the [2020 Pew Research Center survey of US Jews is available here](#)
- 3 [CMJS studies, including data files, are available here.](#)
- 4 Information and selected data from the [Jewish Community Study of New York are available here](#)
- 5 Information about [CMJS' Birthright Israel research is available here](#)
- 6 US Census Bureau, ["Counting Every Voice: Understanding Hard-to-Count and Historically Undercounted Populations," November 2023.](#)