

Sephardic & Mizrahi Jews in the United States:

IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES, AND COMMUNITIES



JIMENA

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

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NYU

BRONFMAN

*The
Research
Approach
Report*

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THE
Research Approach
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



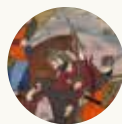
THE
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THE
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Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida
REPORT



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REPORT



THE
Full Report

What This Study Seeks to Do

This report is a starting point for scholars, professionals, and educators eager to better include and understand Sephardic Jews in the US. It is intended to serve as a resource for building a more inclusive Jewish communal landscape—one that acknowledges, understands, celebrates, and learns from the richness of Sephardic life. More specifically, this study aims to:

- Propose new frameworks for understanding Sephardic and Mizrahi identities and experiences in the United States by reviewing, synthesizing, and building on the existing literature.
- Provide population estimates and demographic characteristics of US Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews through a reanalysis of extant national and local community survey data.
- Present four in-depth portraits of contemporary Sephardic communities shaped by post-1965 immigration—including the Syrian community in Brooklyn, NY, the Persian community in Los Angeles, the Bukharian community in Queens, NY, and the Latin Sephardic community in South Florida—based on interviews, site visits, and public space observations.

- Offer practical recommendations developed in facilitated collaboration with communal practitioners and researchers for professionals and educators seeking deeper engagement with Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews.

We recognize that this report is neither exhaustive nor definitive. The challenges of conducting research on a small population that is highly diverse internally led us to focus on four specific, geographically well-defined communities. This decision necessarily excluded other communities and individuals in the United States, including—but not limited to—Turkish, Greek, Moroccan, Iraqi, and Yemenite Sephardic communities; Israeli Mizrahi Jews; and Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews who are integrated into broader Ashkenazi or American Jewish communities.

We also do not address a growing trend of groups and individuals who identify as Bnei Anussim or crypto-Jews—those who identify as descendants of Jews who converted to Catholicism under duress and who are now re-exploring their connection to Judaism. In addition, we captured these four communities at a particular point in time, but communities are dynamic and changing, and we do not know what the future holds for them. We hope that our findings presented here inspire future research encompassing other Sephardic Jews and their communities.

WHAT THIS REPORT COVERS VS. WHAT IT LEAVES OUT

This Report Does:

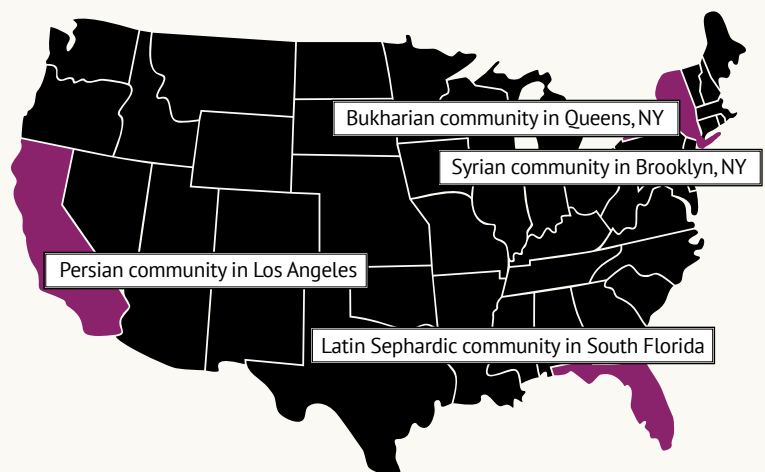
- ✓ Propose new frameworks
- ✓ Analyze 4 key communities
- ✓ Provide demographic estimates
- ✓ Offer recommendations for professionals

This Report Does Not:

- ✗ Focus on Sephardic or Mizrahi individuals living outside Sephardic communities
- ✗ Claim exhaustive representation of all Sephardic Jews
- ✗ Cover crypto-Jews or Bnei Anussim
- ✗ Predict future dynamics of communities



The study provides portraits of 4 contemporary Sephardic communities shaped by post-1965 immigration



Research Principles

ACADEMIC STUDY AND ACTIVIST /COMMUNAL NARRATIVES

The past four years have seen growing attention to underrepresented populations, a trend we applaud, and one that has been matched by a renewed activist spirit to fight for their inclusion at both national and local levels. We believe this interest must be accompanied by academic rigor and thoughtful inquiry. While this study has been informed by the needs and concerns of Sephardic Jews and community leaders, it has been conducted by an academic research team that has carefully distinguished descriptive and analytic findings from communal and activist interests.

PRIORITIZING SELF-IDENTIFICATION AND PERCEPTION

We aimed, as much as possible, to center the voices of our subjects and to prioritize self-identification over imposing categories from external sources. For instance, we have been careful when using the term Sephardic or Mizrahi in this study. This approach reflects our commitment to respecting how individuals identify with either or both categories. Similarly, when examining religious observance, we ask respondents to define their own terms (e.g., “traditional” or “Orthodox”). For questions of race and ethnicity, we prioritize self-identification rather than assuming individuals use terms like Arab Jews, JOC (Jews of color), or “white.”

“

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EPISTEMOLOGICAL HUMILITY

Efforts to shed light on underrepresented populations must remain open to critique, debate, and revision. In this study, we’ve aimed not only to share our conclusions, but also to be transparent about how we reached them. We welcome dialogue, recognize that we may have made mistakes, and hope these findings inspire others to continue expanding the field and building on what we’ve begun.



Major Frameworks

We relied on four important frameworks in writing this report. These frameworks include:

- **Diversity Within Diversity:** Sephardic Jews represent diversity in relation to the Ashkenazi Jewish majority in the US while also exhibiting significant internal diversity across geographic, cultural, and religious lines.
- **Sephardic Jews as a Migration Story:** The experience of Sephardic Jews in the US has been profoundly shaped by countries of origin, migration timing, push-and-pull migration factors, and settlement patterns.
- **Rethinking “East” and Modernity:** The paths of Sephardic Jews (particularly those from Muslim-majority societies) in relation to modernity, postmodernity, and American life should be analyzed as distinct historical and social developments rather than portraying them as lagging behind Western progress.
- **The Need for Appropriate Scholarly Categories:** Scholarly categories designed to study the Ashkenazi majority in the US need to be revised and refashioned for studying Sephardic Jews.

DIVERSITY WITHIN DIVERSITY

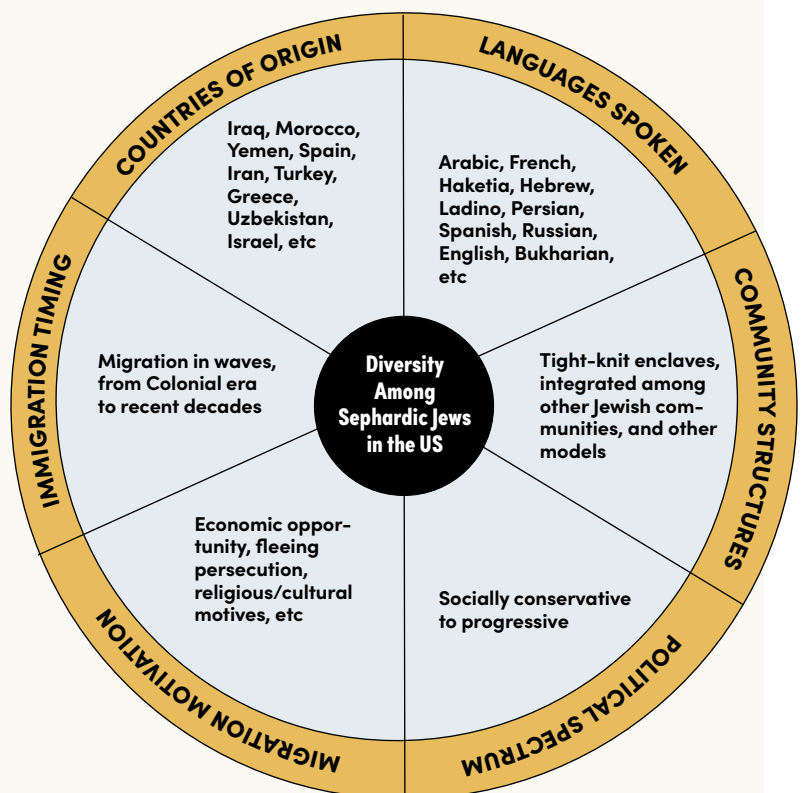
Nobel Laureate Elias Canetti once observed: “Jews are different from other people, but, in reality, they are most different from each other” (*Crowds and Power*, p. 178). No population is monolithic, and Sephardic Jews in the US are no exception. Here are some key dimensions of their diversity:

- **Countries of Origin:** Sephardic Jews trace their roots to countries as varied as Iraq,

Morocco, Yemen, and Spain. Many families have histories spanning multiple migrations across time.

- **Minority Experiences in Countries of Origin:** Some Sephardic Jewish communities developed in Christian-majority contexts, some in Muslim-majority contexts, and some in both. These historical circumstances and trajectories have shaped Jewish practice, identity, and social structures.

MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF DIVERSITY IN SEPHARDIC JEWS



NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- ➔ Understanding Sephardic Jews requires attention to both culture of origin and immigration experience—a “dual lens”
- ➔ Many Sephardic Jews come from Muslim-majority countries
- ➔ Religious survey categories like Orthodox, Conservative, Reform are rooted in Ashkenazi European experience and often fail to describe Sephardic Jews

- **Time of Immigration:** Sephardic Jews have arrived in America across centuries, from the colonial period to the 21st century.
- **Reason for Immigration:** Push-and-pull factors contributed to Sephardic immigration. Some immigrants came seeking economic opportunities, while others fled persecution in their home countries. Many came for both of these reasons or for additional motives.
- **Languages:** Sephardic Jews in the United States speak a wide range of languages from their countries of origin, including Arabic, French, Haketia (a Judeo-Spanish language from Northern Morocco with Arabic influences), Hebrew, Ladino (a Judeo-Spanish language with influences from Hebrew, Turkish, and Greek), Persian, Spanish, and Russian. Some Sephardic Jews in the United States are

late-generation descendants of immigrants and consequently only speak English.

- **Communal Structures:** Some Sephardic Jews live in tight-knit enclaves with their own communal institutions, while others have integrated into Ashkenazi spaces or broader American society.
- **Moral and Political Diversity:** Community members range from socially and politically conservative to socially and politically progressive.
- **Internal Community Distinctions:** Each community contains its own layers of diversity.

SEPHARDIC JEWS AS A MIGRATION STORY

Contemporary Sephardic Jews in the US cannot be understood without considering how their population has been shaped and revitalized by immigration, especially post-1965 immigration. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which removed restrictive and discriminatory quotas in place since 1924, marked a turning point in American immigration policy. This shift places the Sephardic communities profiled in this study alongside other minority groups, such as Vietnamese and Asian Indian immigrants, whose post-1965 arrival profoundly shaped their experiences in the US.

The effects of immigration depend on many factors, including country of origin and time since arrival. A recent immigrant with a foreign accent and no professional accreditation faces vastly different challenges than their grandchild who was born and raised in the United States. This also has implications for Jewish identification and observance: first-generation Sephardic Jews often maintain tighter communal structures and more socially conservative norms compared to those whose families have resided in the US for multiple generations.

This has important implications for practitioners. For example, when teachers seek to better integrate their Persian Jewish students in an Ashkenazi-majority classroom, they should consider not only the cultural dynamics of Jewish life from Iran but also the experience of being descendants of recent immigrants.

Understanding this dual context—country of origin and immigrant status—is essential for effectively engaging with Sephardic and Mizrahi communities in America today.

RETHINKING “EAST” AND MODERNITY

There is a pervasive tendency to view Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews—especially those whose families came from Muslim-majority countries, including across the Middle East and North Africa—as “backwards.” Some of our interview subjects have encountered people who describe Sephardic Jews like them as “exotic” or “anti-quated,” or who dismiss their traditions as repressive.

As historian Daniel Schroeter writes:

European Jews described Middle Eastern and North African Jewish communities as ‘traditional,’ essentially no different from Jews in pre-emancipation Europe. But they believed that emancipation would bring the oppressed and backward communities of the Arab world into the modern age: East would become West... most scholars have assumed the inevitability of modernization of Jewish communities on a Western model...

(A Different Road to Modernity, p. 156–59)

“

Sephardic Jews are not incomplete versions of Ashkenazi American modernity, nor are they simply behind on some presumed timeline of progress; they embody distinct pathways that merit both study and consideration.

This reflects a Western-centric moral framework that presumes the liberal West to be the ultimate arbiter of progress. It also reflects a lack of understanding about different processes of modernization and even westernization that occurred in many different locales around the world, including countries in the Middle East and North Africa where many of our interviewees come from.

We do not share the assumptions that undergird this perspective. Sephardic Jews are not incomplete versions of Ashkenazi American modernity, nor are they simply behind on some presumed timeline of progress; they embody distinct pathways that merit both study and consideration. This study does not aim to moralize but rather to describe the worlds of meaning inhabited by Sephardic Jews on their own terms—including the ways they have forged new approaches to confronting modernity, post-modernity, and America, and their many challenges and opportunities.

THE NEED FOR APPROPRIATE SCHOLARLY CATEGORIES

A related challenge this report addresses is that Sephardic Jews have often been studied through scholarly categories designed for the Ashkenazi majority. Take denominational Jewish religious labels like Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform. These categories, used widely in surveys to study US Jews, are rooted in European Jewish Ashkenazi experiences and often fail to capture Sephardic historical trajectories and contemporary realities. This disconnect exemplifies a broader issue: the categories researchers use to study American Jews frequently obscure the experiences of Sephardic communities.

In confronting this challenge, we join many scholars across disciplines who have explored the complexities of studying populations that do not fit neatly into dominant academic categories. Scholarship by academics studying Mizrahi Jews in Israel has been especially relevant to this report, as they have grappled with similar questions.

Although there is no simple solution to this issue, inclusion requires a clear understanding of what dominant categories reveal, what they hide, and what demands careful translation to new conceptual frameworks.

Works Consulted

This project was informed by and benefitted from an extensive collection of scholarly literature on Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Because the report is designed for a public audience, we did not use a traditional academic citation system within the body of the report. A selected list of the works we consulted in developing this study is included as an appendix to the report, divided into subject areas.

Evolving Context and Impact on Findings

As this study was conducted, significant external events shaped both the research process and the data collected. Two key developments stand out.

First, the horrific October 7th attacks by Hamas in southern Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza and rise in antisemitism across the United States had a profound impact—not only on the logistics of this project, causing a clear pause in research, but also on the narratives and priorities expressed by participants. Data collected

before and after this date reflect a noticeable shift in focus, with respondents addressing different concerns in light of unfolding events.

Second, initiatives aimed at the inclusion and advancement of racial and ethnic minorities in the US, such as DEI efforts, have increasingly become a polarizing political issue, particularly in the lead-up to the 2024 US election. As we conducted interviews with participants before the election and asked them about race, ethnicity, diversity, and inclusion—topics deeply connected to the broader discourse on DEI—their responses reflected the ongoing debate and political salience of these issues. The evolving political landscape shaped how respondents understood and articulated their identities, influencing both their personal perspectives and communal narratives.

These contextual shifts framed the environment in which our research was conducted, and their effects merit careful consideration when interpreting our findings.

