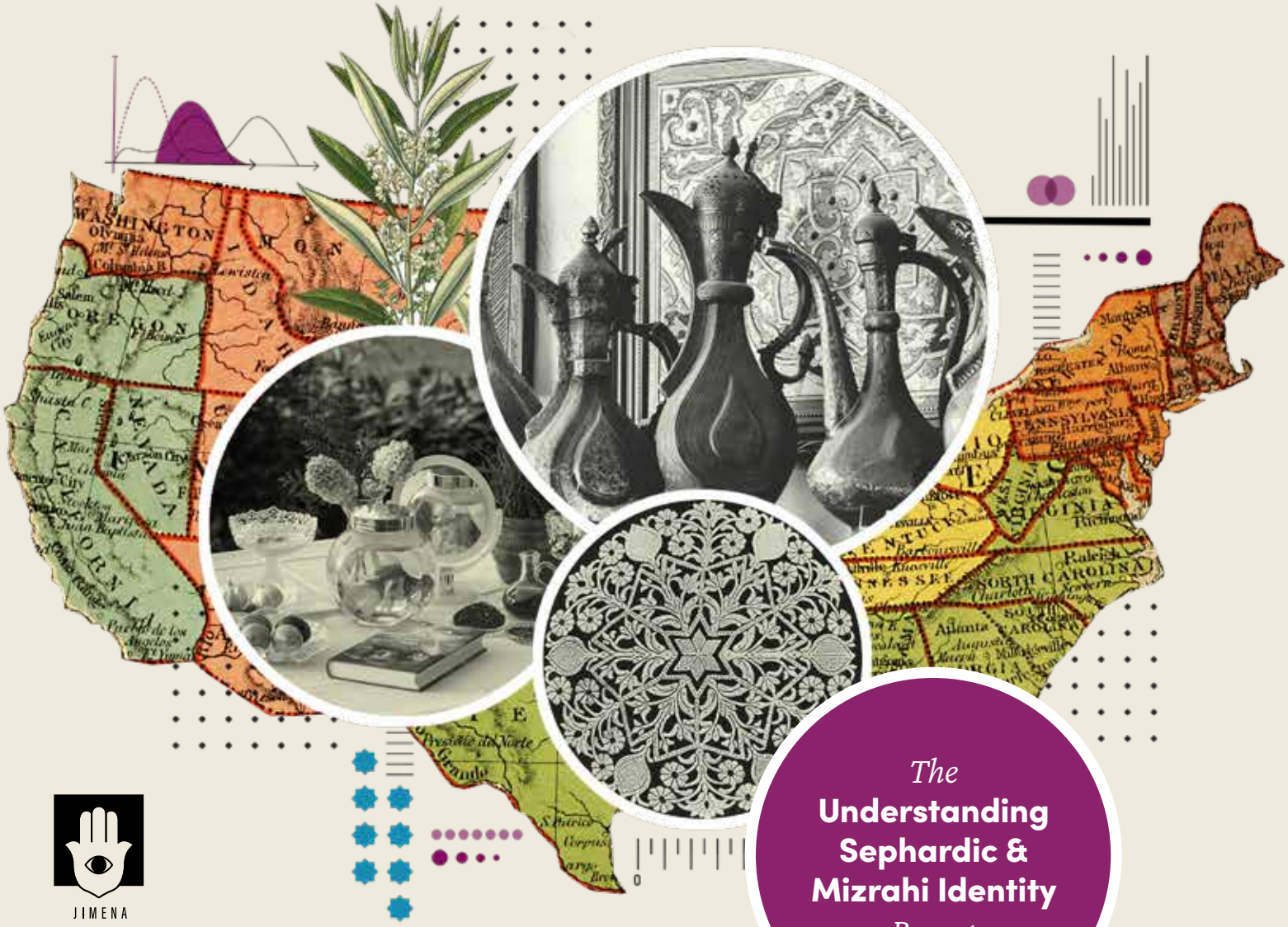
Sephardic & Mizrahi Jews in the United States:

IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES, AND COMMUNITIES



The
Understanding Sephardic & Mizrahi Identity
Report

JIMENA

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

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NYU BRONFMAN

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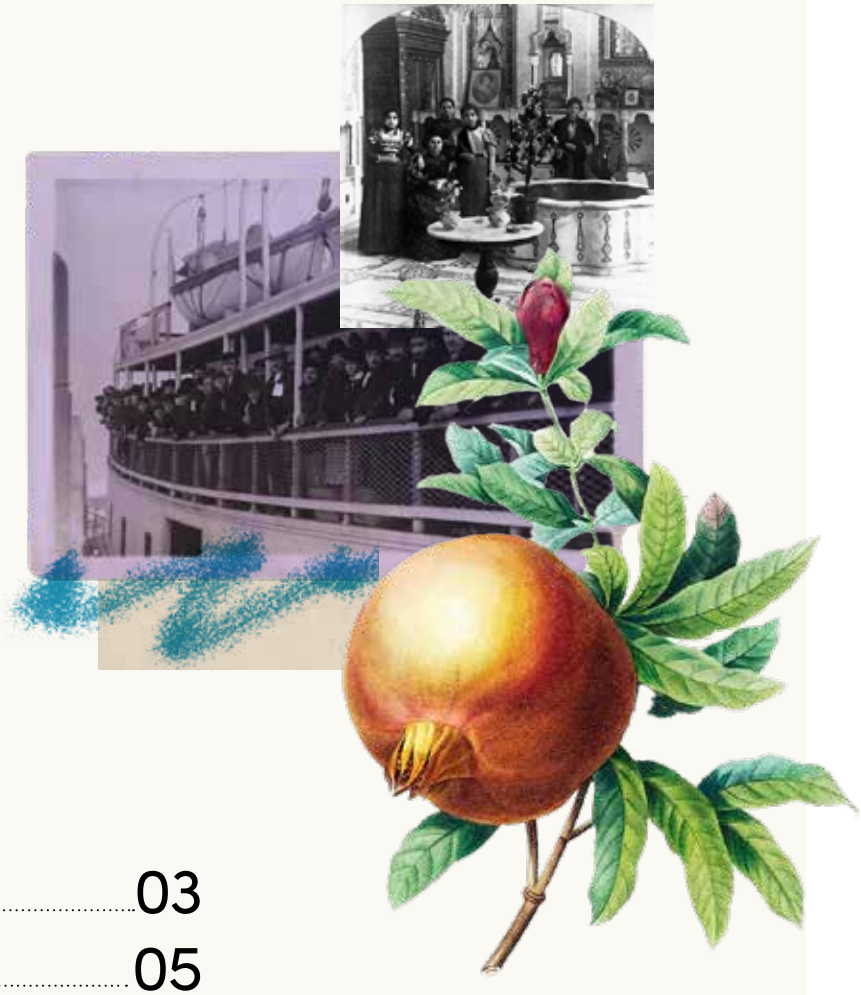
THE

Understanding Sephardic & Mizrahi Identity

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.

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Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States: Meanings, Identities, Experiences

INTRODUCTION

The Sephardic Jewish experience in the United States is chronologically long, geographically diverse, and thematically multifaceted. Conventional histories of American Jews often treat the colonial and early national periods as the "Sephardic" era, giving the impression that this marks the end of the Sephardic story in the US, rather than its beginning. This narrow focus on early arrivals has overshadowed the rich and diverse stories of Sephardic Jews who came long after the founding of the country. From the era of mass migration (circa 1880–1924) through the post-1965 liberalization of immigration policy, Sephardic Jews—who have often been identified by other categories, such as their country of origin or umbrella terms like Ottoman Jews—have continued to arrive in the US from Mediterranean Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Latin America.

Once here, Sephardic immigrants, like many other immigrant groups, reconstituted their communities and set about adapting to their new homeland. In doing so, they sought—and continue to seek—to balance ethnic and cultural continuity with integration into American society. For Sephardic Jews, though, there has been an added challenge of doing this in the shadow of the much larger Ashkenazi Jewish population, most of whom trace their ancestors to eastern European immigrants arriving at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Ashkenazi Jews and the vast institutional infrastructures they established have long dominated the public story of American Jewish life. Sephardic experiences, in contrast, have attracted little sustained attention.

In recent years, however, a growing interest in the Sephardic experience in the US has emerged, both in academic circles and Jewish communal organizations. This interest—catalyzed in part by growing interest in the country's reckoning with racial and ethnic diversity, marginalization, and underrepresentation in recent years—has complicated previous narratives and sharpened awareness of the absence of knowledge on these populations. This has brought to the surface important—and at times fundamental—questions about the terms Sephardic and Mizrahi. Where and when did these terms originate, and what do they mean today? Who do they refer to, and what do they signify for those who claim these identities and heritages? What is the background and timing of their immigration to the US? And what is the relationship between Sephardic and Mizrahi as categories and the common categories of race and ethnicity in the US?

Defining Sephardic

As indicated in the report's introduction, the categories of Sephardic and Mizrahi are dynamic, evolving, and have multiple meanings. In our work, we have tried when possible to privilege self-identification rather than assign categories to our interviewees. This section draws on existing literature about the terms Sephardic and Mizrahi and reflects the three most common ways our interviewees defined and understand the category of Sephardic. We then extended these three dimensions of meaning to also explain the most common ways of defining Mizrahi. While some individuals use only one of these meanings, others referred or implied more than one simultaneously. By combining scholarly insights with the lived perspectives of our participants, we aim to provide a nuanced exploration of what these terms mean today.

ORIGINS

The term "Sepharad" originates from the biblical book of Obadiah (1:20), where it refers to a place where Jewish exiles from Jerusalem were said to have settled. Over time, Sepharad came to be associated with the Roman Empire's Hispania, the ancient name for the Iberian Peninsula. This evolved to include Muslim al-Andalus, Christian Spain, and eventually the modern nation-state of Spain. An ancient community, some Medieval Spanish Jews identified themselves with the Sepharad mentioned by the prophet: as descendants of nobility brought to Iberia after the destruction of the Second Temple. "Sepharad" thus came to represent not only a geographic region but also a vibrant Jewish civilization, encompassing the culture, communities, and traditions of medieval Iberian Jewry.

ANCESTRY

The term "Sephardic" can refer to Jews of Iberian or Spanish descent in their different dispersions. The migration of Sephardic Jews before and after their expulsions from Christian Spain and Portugal in the late 15th century spread Sephardic Jews all over the world, to other western European countries, notably the Netherlands and England, where Sephardic Jews established new communities, and to Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and North African locales where other Sephardic Jews resettled after migrating further eastward.

RELIGION

The term "Sephardic" can refer to Jews who identify with Sephardic religious tradition, one of two primary distinct yet complementary approaches to *Halakha* (Jewish law) and *minhag* (custom).

During the medieval period, two major centers of Jewish legal, intellectual, and religious thought emerged: Sephardic (rooted in Spain and spread by exiles) and Ashkenazi (centered in France and Germany). Deeply influenced by the cultural and religious traditions of the Iberian exiles, many Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and North African Jews who were not themselves direct descendants of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula came to adopt the religious culture and legal approach of Sephardic rabbis or Sephardic migrants to their regions.

The Shulhan Arukh, authored by Rabbi Yosef Karo in the 16th century, exemplifies the emergence of Sephardic and Ashkenazi traditions as complementary within Jewish law and custom. Karo's work codified Sephardic halakhic rulings, and Rabbi Moses Isserles added glosses, known as the "Mappah" (literally: the "tablecloth"), detailing Ashkenazi customs where they diverged from Sephardic practice.

Today, the *Shulhan Arukh,* with Isserles' annotations, remains a central text for both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews, illustrating how these two primary traditions coexist as distinct yet complementary approaches to Jewish law and custom.

Sephardic *Halakha* and *minhag* were influenced by the Muslim societies in which many Jewish legal scholars and rabbis who saw themselves as links in Sephardic tradition lived, shaping common Sephardic practices such as eating *kitniyot* on Passover.[1]

Prominent figures such as Maimonides (12th century), Rabbi Yosef Karo (16th century), and Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (20th century) exemplify legal and religious leadership rooted in Sephardic traditions, while also reflecting the significant internal diversity within these traditions. Notably, Sephardic Judaism, due to a variety of historical and geopolitical factors, did not develop denominational streams like Ashkenazi Jews in the United States.

Today, Sephardic religious practice is often associated with *masortiyut* (traditionalism), a form of Jewish observance and identification that challenges distinctions between religious observance and secularism by offering a spectrum of Jewish practice that blends fealty to traditional norms with diversity of observance.[2] Sephardic and Ashkenazi siddurim also differ from each other in liturgical text, structure, customs, and vocalization, shaped by the historical and geographic influences on each community.[3]

DIFFERENT PATHS OF PRAYER

Sephardic and Ashkenazi prayer books (siddurim) reflect distinct traditions shaped by each community's unique historical and geographic journey. Differences in prayer appear in wording, cantilation, structure, customs, rituals, pronunciation, etc.

IDENTITY

The term "Sephardic" can refer to a social identity, particularly in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews, who make up the substantial majority of North American Jews. In premodern contexts such as Amsterdam, Italy, and Jerusalem, the term distinguished differences in religious practice, socio-economic status, and communal affiliations. In addition, one of the most significant aspects distinguishing Sephardic communities until the 19th century was language. Sephardim were typically referred to as Spanish-speaking Jews, and the linguistic marker of Ladino is crucial to understanding their identity.

In modern Jewish life—particularly in Israel and the US—Ashkenazi Jews have often held demographic dominance and shaped leadership, institutions, and cultural norms. As a result, the meaning of Sephardic has shifted in reaction. In the US, "Sephardic" has moved away from its original focus on Jews from Iberian Spain (who were among the earliest Jewish immigrants to the country) and has increasingly been used to describe non-Ashkenazi identity, simultaneously celebrating cultural vibrancy while reflecting a minority status within broader Jewish populations. Scholars note that this shift may also stem from efforts to distance Sephardic identity from Arab and other Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) associations, particularly in postcolonial contexts.

Part of what this means is that, over time, some groups "became" Sephardic in America to distinguish themselves from an Ashkenazi majority. Internal distinctions, such as those between Moroccan Jews from Tangier and Tétouan, for instance, did not carry the same weight for outside observers. As such, in the US, many of these groups eventually adopted the term "Sephardic"—both because they followed Sephardic law and custom, and because the term became a pan-ethnic colloquialism for non-Ashkenazi Jews in America.

As with many intragroup dynamics, Sephardic groups in the US experienced bias and discrimination from the Ashkenazi majority. These biases manifested in various forms: sometimes rooted in class differences, at times in perceptions of "primitive" backgrounds, and occasionally in racialized distinctions. Ashkenazi Jews, who saw their own customs as the yardstick of Jewish life, often struggled to make sense of Jews whose practices, languages, and traditions were often very different. These painful episodes—spanning generations—strengthened, for many, an "othered" Sephardic identity that defines itself in relation to Ashkenazi norms.

In contemporary times, this relationship has evolved. Our research reveals a diversity of perspectives: for some, being Sephardic signifies marginalization within Ashkenazi-dominant spaces; for others, Sephardic identity is not inherently tied to marginalization. Some insist one can be a minority without experiencing marginalization, while others have built thriving Sephardic communities where they function as the majority.

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The term "Sephardic" can refer to a social identity, particularly in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews, who make up the substantial majority of North American Jews.

Defining Mizrahi

ORIGINS

The term "Mizrahi," referring to Jews from the Middle East and North Africa, did not exist until the late 19th century. Broadly speaking, before and after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, hundreds of thousands of Jews from MENA regions immigrated to Israel. These Jews typically identified themselves by local origins, such as from Mashad (Iran) or Baghdad (Iraq), reflecting linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic diversity. The dominant Ashkenazi group in Israel tended to view these communities monolithically, calling them *edot Hamizrah* (Communities of the East) and later as *Mizrahim* (Easterners). But the term was more than just a geographic marker.[4] The label also carried derogatory connotations, implying a supposed lack of social, cultural, and economic development among Jews from the "Orient" (as it is sometimes translated), and *Mizrahi* came to denote a disadvantaged ethnic minority of Jews from MENA countries.

Although initially imposed by Ashkenazim, the term *Mizrahi* was later reclaimed and appropriated by MENA Jews, beginning with activists and academics, and has gained increasing prominence in public discourse, particularly among the younger generation in the last decades. In this sense, the development of the terms Mizrahi in Israel and Sephardic in the United States share a common pattern. They reflect how encounters between groups in new social contexts resulting from immigration can generate new meanings for terms that differ from how populations used them prior to immigrating.

ANCESTRY

The term "Mizrahi" can refer to Israeli Jews from MENA regions. Today, about half of all Israeli Jews have some Mizrahi ancestry.

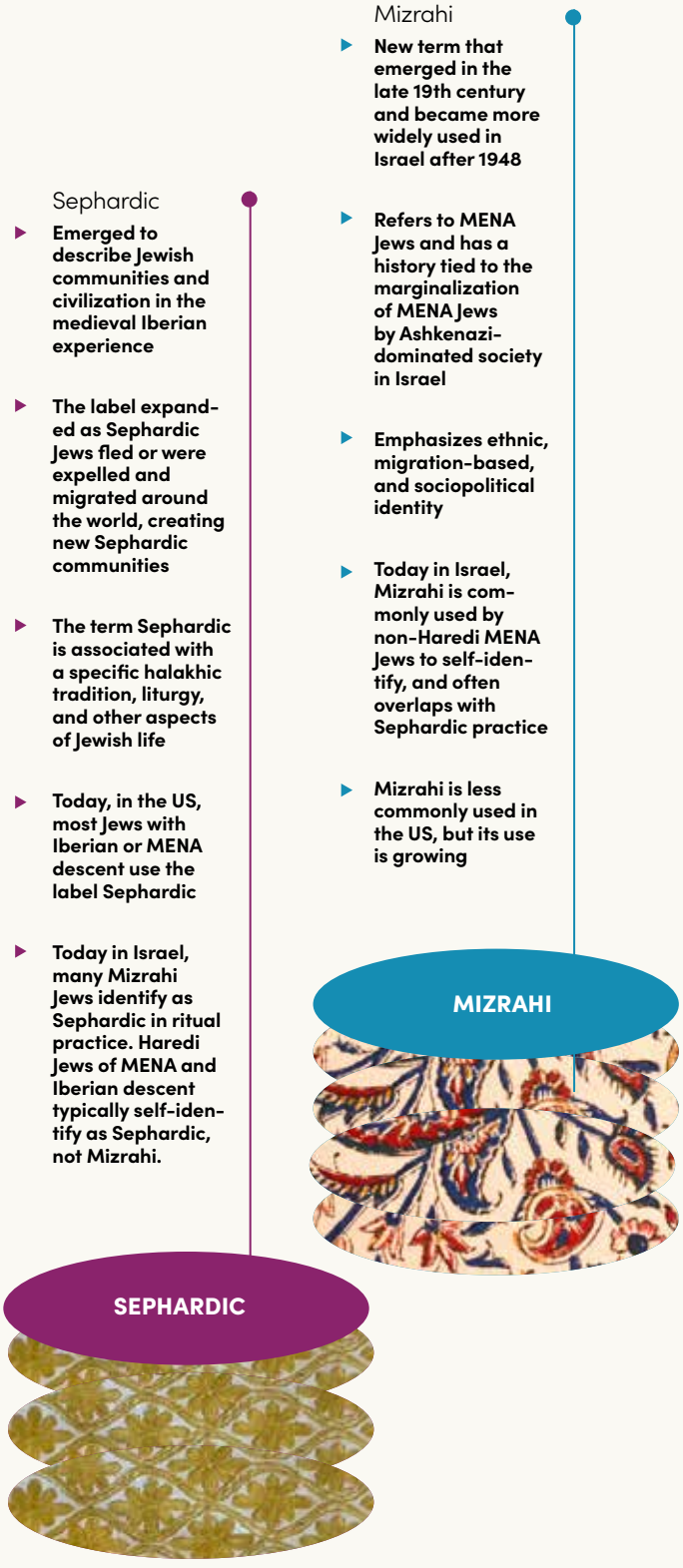
RELIGION

The term Mizrahi is occasionally used to refer to the religious practice and customs of Israeli Jews originally from the MENA region. However, Mizrahi more often connotes a historical Jewish experience related to ethnic origin, migration, and social status in Israel, and Mizrahim in Israel generally align religiously with Sephardic Jewish law and customs, in particular with

NOTEWORTHY FACTS

- The term "Mizrahi" emerged in the late 19th century and became a dominant category in Israel in the second half of the 20th century to refer to Jews from MENA regions
- Most Mizrahi Jews in Israel align with Sephardic Jewish law and tradition
- "Mizrahi" became more common in US discourse in the 2000s, mainly among younger Jews and academics

MEANINGS OF SEPHARDIC AND MIZRAHI



their traditionalist orientation to religious practice. This means that many will self-identify as Mizrahim even as they will also speak of the Sephardic religious tradition as their own. The ethnic connotation of the term Mizrahi helps explain why most Haredi Jews in Israel of MENA descent prefer the term Sephardic over Mizrahi, as reflected in the Haredi political party Shas. The acronym Shas, which has had different iterations over time, includes the term "*Sephardic* [Torah] Guardians."

IDENTITY

In Israel, the term Mizrahi can refer to a social identity, particularly in contrast to Ashkenazi Jews. As noted, the term was initially imposed by Ashkenazim but over time was reclaimed by Mizrahim themselves. Mizrahim in Israel faced systemic inequities during the state's early decades, including marginalization and economic disparities. Today, while the gaps between the two groups have narrowed in some social sectors—and have been further blurred by intermarriage—Mizrahi Jews still face disparities in socio-economic achievements across many areas of Israeli life, including university matriculation, income levels, and entry into elite army units. These disparities reinforce the use of the term as a form of identity that Mizrahim use to distinguish themselves from Ashkenazim.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE TERM MIZRAHI IN THE US

In Israel, the term Mizrahi was first used by academics and activities and subsequently became widely embraced in the population, a dynamic shaped by many factors, including a long history of shared responses to both state and popular discrimination. In the US, its adoption has been later, slower, and not as widespread. Based on conversations with scholars and activists, we surmise that "Mizrahi" entered American Jewish discourse in the early 2000s, introduced by academics and activists who sought to link Sephardic Jews in the US to Mizrahi identity and/or the Mizrahi struggle in Israel. The adoption of the term has varied.

The adoption of the term Mizrahi varies across age groups, political affiliations, and regions. Among our interviewees, it is more common as a form of personal

and social identity among younger, politically and socially progressive Jews, as well as those on the West Coast compared to those on the East Coast. Notably, it has been adopted by some US Jews with Middle Eastern or North African roots who feel uncomfortable with the term "Sephardic" due to their lack of Spanish or Iberian ancestry. For them, it serves as a way to distinguish themselves from both Sephardic and Ashkenazi counterparts.

Mizrahi is also sometimes joined with Sephardic, typically in the form of "Sephardic/Mizrahi," a combination that acknowledges differences in the ancestral lineages each terms signifies and simultaneously provides a hybrid identity, with connotations of marginalization, that stands in contrast to the Ashkenazi Jews who comprise the majority of the US Jewish population. Confronting the multiple meanings and diverse usage of each category, survey researchers in the US have increasingly adopted the combined term "Sephardic/Mizrahi."

Nevertheless, Sephardic remains the more widely used term in the US, and as a reflection of that, this report primarily, though not exclusively, uses the term Sephardic. An important exception to this—which this report does not explore directly—are Mizrahi Israeli Jews who have moved from Israel to the United States. Their experiences can provide important insights and deserve consideration as well.

Sephardic Jews in the United States: Historical Overview

EARLY IMMIGRATION

In the colonial and early national period of the US, Western European Jews of Iberian descent established a broad Atlantic network of small but cohesive Sephardic communities reaching from the Caribbean Islands to Rhode Island. These communities were founded by Jews whose families fled Spain and Portugal's expulsions, inquisitions, and forced conversions to Catholicism. Many had to migrate repeatedly, as their new host countries often adopted the Inquisition as well. Fleeing the Portuguese Inquisition after the Netherlands lost control of Brazil, some Jews found refuge—albeit not always a fully welcoming one—in Dutch and British colonies.

Most histories of Jews in the United States begin with the arrival of such Jewish refugees in New Amsterdam (later New York City) in 1654, marking the earliest known Jewish settlement in what would become the US. This Sephardic migration preceded the establishment of German Jewish communities in the mid-19th century and the massive wave of Eastern European Jews in the late 19th century, which solidified Ashkenazi Jews as the dominant Jewish group in the United States—already a majority by the 1820s.

Sephardic Jewish life in the United States followed that of London and Amsterdam, featuring a unique "Spanish and Portuguese" liturgy and ritual, distinct from other Sephardic communities worldwide. By the mid-18th century, Sephardic synagogues were established in places such as Barbados, Jamaica, St. Thomas, Savannah, Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, and Rhode Island. Sephardic Jews played a critical role in shaping early Jewish life in the United States. For example, they established the Touro Synagogue, built in 1763 in Newport, Rhode Island. It remains the oldest synagogue building still standing in the US and North America.

CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL, EST.1654

he first Jewish congregation in the US, founded by Sephardic Jews fleeing the Inquisition

IMMIGRATION IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Jews began immigrating to the US. These were primarily two groups from the Ottoman Empire: Ladino-speaking Jews from Greece and Turkey, and Syrian Jews. They often found they had little in common with the established Spanish-Portuguese communities.

These new immigrants were often stigmatized by the now-dominant Ashkenazi population, who negatively referred to them as "Oriental"—a term that some within these communities had used to describe themselves. Many still retained specific identities tied to their countries—and often cities—of origin, such as Greek, Turkish, or Syrian. Language further distinguished Ladino-speaking Turkish and Greek Jews from Arabic-speaking Syrian Jews. By eventually adopting the Sephardic label, they helped drive the term Sephardic toward a more expansive, pan-ethnic meaning in the US.

Approximately 20,000–30,000 Sephardic Jews arrived during this period, seeking the economic and political opportunities of America. While adjusting to their new homes, immigrants still sought the familiarity and comfort of their traditions and so individual communities remained largely separate, often with more differences than similarities. Furthermore, Ladino-speaking Jews tended to assimilate more rapidly into mainstream Ashkenazi culture, while Syrians maintained stronger ties to their unique communal identity. Both groups, nonetheless, worked to preserve their minority-within-a-minority heritage.

The 1924 Immigration Act severely restricted immigration to the United States, establishing discriminatory quotas that favored Western and Northern Europeans. It limited or effectively barred immigration from places such as Asia, Eastern Europe—and most importantly for the subjects of this study, drastically limited immigrants from countries in the former Ottoman Empire.[12] Despite this, some Sephardic Jews still managed to immigrate—often through intermediary stops in Latin American countries, provisions for family reunification, or acquiring refugee status. Some who arrived on refugee visas were Sephardic Holocaust survivors, but the decimation of Balkan and Greek Sephardic communities during the Holocaust dealt a huge blow to Ladino-speaking Jewry and erased the potential for large-scale postwar immigration to the US.

By the mid-20th century, most Sephardic Jews in the United States fell into three main groups. The largest was the Ladino-speaking community, spread across the country. The Syrian community, concentrated in New York. Third, there was the centuries-old Spanish and Portuguese Sephardic community whose prominent place within America had faded.

POST-1965 IMMIGRATION

Starting in 1965, changes to US immigration policy became more liberalized for immigrants from Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa. These immigration

KEY MOMENTS SHAPING SEPHARDIC MIGRATION TO THE US

1492

Expulsion from Spain

In 1492, Jews were expelled from Spain and, a few years later, from Portugal. Many found refuge across Europe, the Ottoman Empire, North Africa, and the Americas, creating the foundation of a global Sephardic diaspora.

1654:

Arrival in New Amsterdam

Sephardic refugees fleeing Brazil arrived in Dutch New Amsterdam, establishing the earliest Jewish community in what would become the US

1700s

Spanish-Portuguese synagogues established

Synagogues were founded across the Atlantic—from Rhode Island to Jamaica—reflecting a connected Sephardic network

LATE 1800s–1924:

Ottoman-era Jewish Immigration

Jews from the Ottoman Empire—including Ladino-speaking communities from Turkey, Greece, and the Balkans, as well as Arabic-speaking Jews from Syria—immigrated to the United States seeking economic opportunity and stability as the empire declined.

1924:

Immigration Act restriction

US immigration laws drastically limited entry from Eastern Europe, Asia, and former Ottoman regions, curbing Sephardic immigration

POST-1965:

New Sephardic Communities

Liberalized US immigration policies enabled the arrival of new Sephardic and Mizrahi communities from the Middle East, North Africa, the former Soviet Union, Latin America, and beyond.

reforms played a significant role in shaping the Sephardic landscape in the United States. The four communities we chose to profile in our study illustrate these dynamics, reinforcing the usage of the term Sephardic as a pan-ethnic identity in the US. Here, we offer a brief historical overviews of each community's migration to the US in chronological order of when these groups began to arrive. Further in this report, the portraits also explain why we chose some labels over other—for example, Persian Jews instead of Iranian and Latin Jews instead of Hispanic.

Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn, NY

Syrian Jews began leaving Syria during the late 1800s and early 1900s, when the region was part of the Ottoman Empire. They were primarily driven by the decline of the empire and an increasingly struggling economy. A small Syrian Jewish community was established in New York, which grew as families joined relatives who had already immigrated. Although the 1924 Immigration Act largely halted new arrivals, some still managed to come. This community is included in our profiles shaped by post-1965 immigration because one of its defining characteristics is that it became a hub for Jews fleeing anti-Jewish persecution and instability in neighboring countries. These countries, once closely connected under the Ottoman Empire, shared constant migration, similar Arabic dialects, and families often spread between them. Key waves of immigration included Jews who fled or were expelled from Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s, Jews escaping the civil war in Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s, and Jews who were finally allowed to leave Syria in the 1990s after enduring decades of anti-Jewish state persecution, including restrictions on emigration. These successive layers of immigration helped shape what is now known as the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn.

Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles, CA

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran marked significant rupture for the Persian Jewish population, made up of ancient communities with thousands of years of history. Before the revolution, Iran had a strong Jewish population, primarily concentrated in cities like Tehran,

Isfahan, Hamadan, and Shiraz. However, the revolution led to the rise of an Islamist government under Ayatollah Khomeini, which brought significant changes to the status of religious minorities, shifting away from the more secular conditions that had previously offered them relative stability. Moreover, the Ayatollah's vision for Iran was interwoven with aggressive anti-Zionism and opposition to the State of Israel. These factors created what most Jews felt was a hostile and even dangerous environment filled with fear and uncertainty. These conditions propelled the majority of the Persian Jewish community to flee or leave the country, seeking safety and stability in countries like the United States, Israel, and Europe. Many Persian Jews settled in Los Angeles, forming one of the largest Persian Jewish diasporas outside Iran, as well as in other cities such as New York and London. While the majority left, a small Jewish community remains in Iran today, navigating life under the Islamic Republic. Persian Jews have an ancient tradition and a unique history shaped by their prosperity in secular Iran, setting them apart from other MENA and Sephardic communities while also sharing some similarities.

BUKHARIAN REALITY UNDER SOVIET INFLUENCE

Although the USSR imposed harsh anti-religion legislation, these restrictions were not equally enforced in every region of the Soviet Union. Bukharian Jews were able to maintain their religious traditions and Jewish communal life, despite being under Soviet rule.

Bukharian Jewish community in Queens, NY

Bukharian Jews, whose roots stretch back hundreds of years, trace their origins to Central Asia, specifically the emirate of Bukhara, which encompassed parts of modern-day Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. While influenced over time by Persian and Sephardic traditions, Bukharian Jews became largely isolated from other Jewish communities by the eighteenth century due to regional upheaval. Under Russian control in the late nineteenth century, the Russian language became increasingly prevalent among Bukharians. Uniquely, their region did not face the same Soviet restrictions as other areas, allowing them to retain more of their Jewish identity and religious observance even while under Soviet rule. Immigration to the United States occurred in two waves: a small one in the 1970s and a larger one in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as economic instability and rising antisemitism following the Soviet Union's collapse prompted many Jews to seek new opportunities. Bukharian Jews dispersed globally, with significant populations settling in Israel and Queens, New York.

Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida

Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and North African Jews immigrated to the United States in the early 20th century but also moved to other destinations such as France, Israel, Canada, and countries across Latin America, where they established small yet vibrant communities. Most sought better economic prospects, while others fled rising anti-Jewish sentiment in their home countries, particularly after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. Often, language reflective of colonial rule in MENA countries shaped where MENA Jews would migrate. For instance, Latin America was especially appealing to Moroccan Jews from regions of northern and southern Morocco colonized by Spain, as they identified with Spanish culture and were familiar with the Spanish language. Similarly, Turkish Jews from Istanbul and Silivri found their way to Cuba, confident that their knowledge of Ladino would help them.[5] In recent decades, political and economic instability in Latin America, as well as communist and anti-democratic regimes such as those in Cuba and Venezuela, have driven many of these Jews to immigrate to the United States, with a significant number settling in South Florida. Latin Sephardic Jewish immigrants in this region combine Sephardic and Hispanic identities, reflecting diversity in their Sephardic cultural heritage and their countries of origin in Latin America. For many Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida, the United States represents the second stage of their families' migration journey, following their initial departure from MENA countries.

Sephardic Religious Practice in the US

Sephardic communities in the United States today exhibit diverse Jewish religious practices. Many, particularly those originating from Muslim-majority countries, have a strong foundation in religious traditionalism, which Israeli researchers have termed *masortiyut*. As an approach towards Jewish practice and community rather than a formal denomination, *masortiyut* encompasses a wide spectrum of Jewish observance within communal norms and places a significant emphasis on Jewish traditions in the home, such as celebrating Shabbat together.

CUSTOMS, LITURGY AND LAW

Institutionally, Sephardic religious practice in the United States reflects shared characteristics across communities. For instance, rabbinical programs in the United States or Israel that ordain Sephardic rabbis follow Sephardic legal traditions. Similarly, Sephardic synagogues tend to share common features—most are not egalitarian, and the *hazzan* (prayer leader) typically leads from the center of the room rather than the front. While Sephardic Jews maintain distinct liturgical tradition shaped by traditions in their country or city of origin, there are notable commonalities. For example, Sephardic Jews customarily recite Selichot prayers throughout the entire month of Elul in preparation for the High Holidays and include the recitation of Shir Hashirim on Friday nights services. There are other broad similarities in Sephardic Jewish legal practice such as permitting the consumption of *kitniyot,* such as legumes, during Passover and performing Birkat Kohanim (the priestly blessing) daily during morning prayers.

> **Today, scholars refer to masortiyut as a framework for understanding Israeli Jews (both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi) whose religious observance functions along a spectrum, rather than within the rigid religious-secular divide.**

“

Many contemporary Sephardic Jews in the US do not identify with denominations like Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox Judaism and instead understand their Judaism as a tradition and in non-denominational terms.

DENOMINATIONS & TRADITIONALISM

Historically, Sephardic Jews differ from Ashkenazi Jews in how they perceive their religious identity. Today in both Israel and the United States, there are fundamental differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews not only in law and custom but also in the very structure of religious observance.

In Israel, for example, scholars have pointed out that the religious-secular binary, which sociologists had assumed to be universal (i.e., the distinction between being “religious” or “secular”), does not apply to many Mizrahi Israelis. Mizrahi communities historically developed in societies where this binary did not emerge in the same way. Today, scholars refer to *masortiyut* as a framework for understanding Israeli Jews (both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi) whose religious observance functions along a spectrum, rather than within the rigid religious-secular divide.

This phenomenon has been less studied in the US, where Sephardic Judaism presents a complex and evolving landscape. Many contemporary Sephardic Jews in the US do not identify with denominations like Reform, Conservative, or Orthodox Judaism and instead understand their Judaism as a tradition and in non-denominational terms.

At the same time, in an American context—where Sephardic communities exist as a minority within a broader Ashkenazi environment—many Sephardic individuals, institutions, and synagogues have aligned with denominational frameworks, particularly Ashkenazi Orthodoxy, including the influence of Haredi Orthodoxy. For some, this alignment serves as a way to signal that they are not affiliated with Conservative or Reform Judaism, making Orthodoxy the least inappropriate denominational category available. In other cases, it reflects shared values, such as gender separation in prayer and a more conservative approach to Jewish law.

In some communities, Orthodox influence has blurred distinctions between traditionalism and Orthodox practice due to continuous interaction and the adoption of customs. While many interviewees described their backgrounds as moderate and tolerant of diverse religious lifestyles, some viewed Orthodox influence as narrowing communal tolerance and diminishing the openness to religious diversity that characterizes *masortiyut*. Some saw this as a departure from how Sephardic Jews have historically lived. Others argued that *masortiyut* needed Orthodox institutions to have continuity in America.

There are notable exceptions to the broader trend of Ashkenazi Orthodox influence. Among Sephardic Jews in Ashkenazi-majority communities, religious diversity remains significant, with individuals participating across various denominations, including Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and others. At the community level, exceptions also exist. For example, the Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles demonstrates broad communal diversity, with large numbers of Persian Jews engaging with multiple denominations—from Reform to Conservative to Orthodox—while maintaining connections to both traditional and Orthodox institutions.

Race and Ethnicity in the United States

The growing interest in Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the United States has emerged alongside the broader national reckoning with racial and ethnic diversity, marginalization, and underrepresentation. Race and racial categories, it bears emphasizing, are socially constructed frameworks used to organize human populations based on perceived physical differences. Ethnicity, by contrast, is typically defined by cultural heritage, traditions, and shared history, particularly among immigrant communities, and the integration of the communities into American society.

The place of Jews within America's racial and ethnic frameworks remains ambiguous in several key ways. First, the perceived social, political, and economic success of Jews, along with their integration into mainstream society, often associates the majority of Jews of European descent with whiteness. Yet, for many Jews, a shared sense of peoplehood, culture, and history reinforces their identity as a distinct group, separate from the broader concept of "white America." Rising antisemitism, particularly from white supremacists, has further complicated this association, leading many to question whether Jews can—or should—be seen as unproblematically white.

Second, Jews have always been a multi-ethnic and multi-racial people as those terms are understood today. Thousands of years of diasporic living across different regions of the world produced distinct Jewish

cultural identities, languages, traditions, and physical appearances. Cases of intermarriage, adoption, and conversion further expanded the diversity in categories of Jewish ethnic and racial identification.

Third, ambiguity persists because mainstream American society—and historically, the US government—primarily categorizes Jews as a religious group rather than a racial or ethnic one. Jews are not formally recognized as a racial or ethnic group in the US Census or most other official efforts to measure diversity and equity.

SEPHARDIC JEWS IN THE US RACIAL AND ETHNIC FRAMEWORK

If the position of Jews generally within America's racial and ethnic categorization is complex, that of Sephardic Jews is even more so. Historically, Ashkenazi Jews at times racialized their Sephardic co-religionists as they navigated their own racial identity in America. Today, increasing awareness of diversity has led some to frame Sephardic experiences within broader conversations about Jewish racial and ethnic diversity. It is important to approach these conversations with caution because generalizations about the relationship between Sephardic identity and US racial and ethnic categories risk oversimplifying a nuanced reality. In that spirit, we highlight several high-level themes about the contemporary intersection of Sephardic and US racial and ethnic identities. These themes may seem to contradict each other, but this only points to the complex nature of how these identities intersect with each other.

To begin, it is important not to assume that the experiences of Jews who identify as Sephardic and Jews who identify with US racial and ethnic categories—such as black, Asian, Hispanic, and Middle Eastern—are parallel. There are structural similarities in these cases in the sense of exclusion from or unequal representation in majority group spaces, but the minority status of Sephardic Jews within majority-Ashkenazi spaces is distinct from the minority status of Jews with racial and ethnic identities within majority white Jewish spaces. Conflating them risks oversimplifying the nuanced ways in which identity, history, social positioning, and contemporary perspectives may differ among and between them.

> **The religious-secular binary... does not apply to many Mizrahi Israelis.**

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews take varied position when it comes to US racial and ethnic categories. When asked, some Sephardic Jews identify as white while others identify as Asian, black, Hispanic and Middle Eastern, indicating that these identities—despite being *distinct* from each other—sometimes *overlap* with each other. Still other Sephardic Jews reject US racial and ethnic categories altogether because they do not reflect their experiences in their countries of origin and do not represent their own self-understanding.[6]

It follows that the intersection of Sephardic and Mizrahi identity and identity as JOC is complex and differentiated. Historically, Ashkenazi Jews at times racialized their Sephardic co-religionists as they navigated their own racial identity in America. Today, increasing awareness of diversity has led some to frame Sephardic experiences within broader conversations about Jewish racial and ethnic diversity.

In recent years, the term Jews of color (JOC) has gained prominence as a way to describe non-white Jews in America, even as the boundaries of this category remain contested. However, whether the term should apply to all non-white Jews remains an open question—one that has not been thoroughly studied and that our findings challenge. In popular discourse, Jews of color is often positioned in opposition to Ashkenazi, implying that Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews automatically fall under the JOC umbrella and that white and Ashkenazi are synonymous. As a result, JOC are sometimes grouped alongside Sephardim and Mizrahi Jews or (mistakenly) equated with them, while white-presenting Jews are incorrectly assumed to be Ashkenazi.

An overwhelming majority of our respondents—including Syrian, Bukharian, Hispanic, Moroccan, Persian, and Jews of other MENA descent—do not identify with the category of JOC, a finding that aligns with the survey data presented in the next report. At the same time, some Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews—a minority, to be sure—do in fact identify as JOC and/or have built alliances with organizations representing JOC, citing shared experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and underrepresentation within the broader Jewish landscape.

Today, the most common points of intersection between Sephardic Jews and US minority ethnic and racial categories are Hispanic and Middle Eastern/North African. This intersection is complicated by upcoming changes in US Census classification. Until recently, Hispanic ethnicity was treated separately from race—e.g., white, black, Asian—on government forms, and there was no official MENA category, despite its increasing recognition as a racial/ethnic category in America. The US government's 2024 decision to consolidate race and ethnicity into a single framework and introduce a MENA option will give Sephardic (and other) Jews the ability to choose Hispanic and/or MENA instead of, or in addition to, white. However, it remains unclear how many will do so. While many Sephardic Jews continue to identify strongly with their origins in the Middle East, North Africa, or Latin America, they often distinguish themselves from non-Jewish immigrants from those regions with whom they sometimes have uneasy relationships, and they may reject the categories that align with those regions.

Lastly, as noted earlier in this section, it is important to remember that Sephardic identity has its origins in ancestry and religion, not race. Reflecting one of two major Jewish religious traditions that has existed for over a millennium across different regions, empires, and countries, Sephardic identity fosters unique forms of belonging and exclusion that do not fit neatly into US racial and ethnic frameworks. There is some overlap, but that is an empirical issue that requires investigation. Assuming a *priori* that there is complete alignment between Sephardic Jews and Jews who share US racial and ethnic identities is a disservice to both, for it denies their distinctive histories and experiences, as well as their distinctive contemporary perspectives, challenges, and needs.

NOTES

1 Kitniyot generally refers to small, grain-like foods such as rice, corn, lentils, beans, peas, and mustard seeds, which Ashkenazi Jews historically—and until today—did not eat on Passover.

2 We will expand on *masortiyut* in the community portrait section of this study. Given the popular use of this term, it is worth noting that scholarship on *masortiyut* resists framing traditional populations as untouched by the modern world.

3 While Ashkenazi siddurim generally follow Nusach [liturgical style] Ashkenaz or Nusach Sefard (which incorporates some Kabbalistic elements), contemporary Sephardic siddurim are labeled Nusach edot Hamizrah. Just as Sephardic Halakha and minhag evolved in diverse regions, so too did Sephardic siddurim, with some adhering closely to specific communal nusach (such as Moroccan, Syrian, or Turkish traditions), while others reflect a broader edot Hamizrah tradition, developed in the past century as a standardized pan-Sephardic liturgy. Though the siddur text itself does not dictate pronunciation, differences in vocalization reflect the phonetic traditions of each community, further illustrating the distinct yet complementary nature of Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish practices.

4 As a geographic marker, Mizrahi" which means "Eastern" is sometimes inaccurate, as many of these communities originated west of Israel. For example, Moroccan Jews, the largest Mizrahi-identified population in Israel, historically called themselves Maghrebi (Westerners).

5 This law contributed to the growth of Jewish communities from these areas across Latin America, including migration to Cuba, Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and other countries.

6 Likewise, there are Jews who identify as Ashkenazi and also as Asian, black, Hispanic and Middle Eastern, and there are Jews who identify as Ashkenazi who reject US racial categories altogether, including Ashkenazi Jews who are white-presenting but reject white as a racial identity.