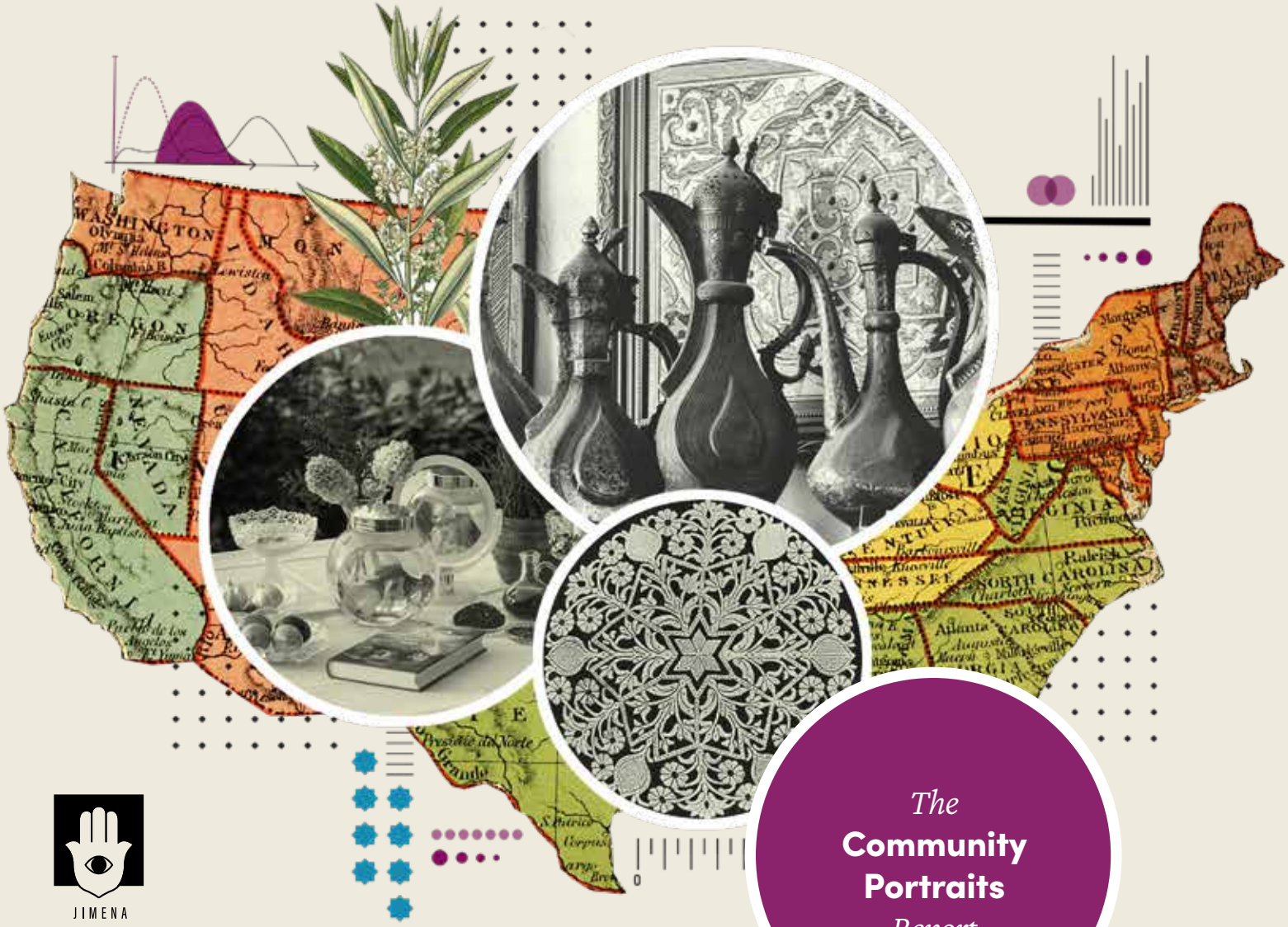
Sephardic & Mizrahi Jews in the United States:

IDENTITIES, EXPERIENCES, AND COMMUNITIES



The **Community Portraits** *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

Community Portraits

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 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.

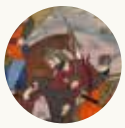
List of Reports:

THE
Who We Are
REPORT

THE
Research Approach
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

Community Portraits

INTRODUCTION

The following four community portraits are a central component of this study. They tell the story of four different groups of Sephardic Jews who migrated to the US either fully or in part after reforms to US immigration law in 1965 opened the door to more immigrants from regions including Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. We focused on the Syrian community in Brooklyn, New York, the Persian community in Los Angeles, the Bukharian community in Queens, New York, and the Latin Sephardic population hub in South Florida. All four communities trace their original geographic lineages to Muslim-majority countries and regions, though for Latin Sephardic Jews, their most recent countries of residence in Latin America are majority Christian.

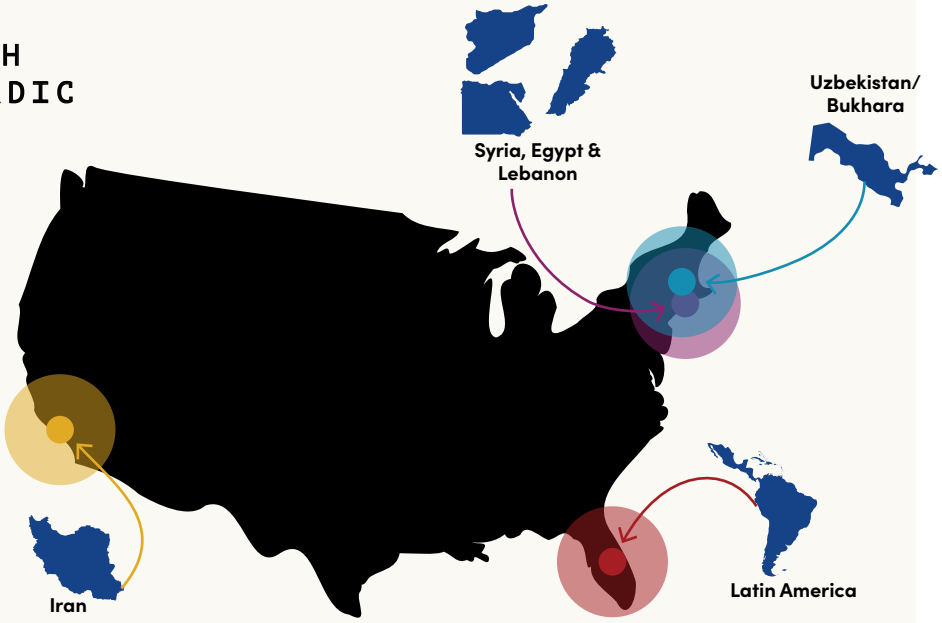
As qualitative studies of geographically-concentrated communities, based on in-depth interviews and observations, these portraits provide deep insights into how the communities "operate"—the social networks and institutions that support them, the moral frameworks that regulate them, and the relationships they have with Ashkenazi Jews in particular and American society more generally. This brief introduction to the communities serves to delineate selective commonalities they share and differences that distinguish them from each other.

At the same time, qualitative studies are not—and do not claim to be—representative of all people who have a particular identity or consider themselves part of a group. When our portraits describe a particular community, it is a representation of how our interviewees described them to us. The strength of individual identification with social groups and communities varies. Those who live on the geographic peripheries of communities, or who have moved away altogether from them, or whose cultural, social or political commitments lie elsewhere, are likely to be quite different than those who live "in the neighborhood" and whose behaviors and attitudes are reinforced on a daily basis through

FROM BROOKLYN TO SOUTH FLORIDA: WHERE SEPHARDIC COMMUNITIES FLOURISH

- **Brooklyn:** Syrian Jewish community
- **Queens:** Bukharian Jewish community
- **L.A.:** Persian Jewish community
- **South Florida:** Latin Sephardic Jewish Community*

*For many Latin Sephardic Jews, the US is not the first stop, but one of several in a longer migration journey that began when their families left the MENA region or other countries of origin



> **We are describing the lives of those deeply embedded in Sephardic networks, not making claims about authenticity.**

interactions with other community members. For example, marriage to non-Jews in each of these portrayed communities is strongly rejected, but a quarter to a third of married Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the CMJS surveys (see Section 3) have a non-Jewish spouse.

The community portraits—and the themes of commonalities and differences drawn in this introduction—describe the lives of those deeply embedded in Sephardic networks, institutions, and geographic locales, much more so than those who identify as Sephardic but have tenuous social and geographic ties to the groups. By choosing to focus on communities, we are not making a statement about the authenticity of one group over another or about groups over individuals. We hope future studies will look at more forms of Sephardic life in the US.

While some survey data on these populations is now available, we chose to create portraits based primarily on interviews and qualitative data.[1] This decision was influenced by several factors, including timing—when the portraits were assigned and written, some data was not yet available, though we have since integrated it into our quantitative section—and the uneven distribution of data across different communities.

More fundamentally, this was a deliberate methodological choice, drawing on grounded theory and the understanding that for understudied populations whose categories of analysis have not yet been fully explored and whose members are less likely to answer surveys, qualitative research provides a crucial foundation. While quantitative surveys capture broad trends, they often fail to reach certain segments of these communities or may reflect the perspectives of those most likely to engage with surveys rather than the community as a whole.

Additionally, for some populations, discrepancies between survey results and lived realities suggest that integrating quantitative and qualitative data requires careful analysis. In such cases, mixed methods research is not just a matter of using different kinds of data, but requires a thoughtful process of reconciliation, examining where different methods align, where they diverge, and why certain groups may be over- or underrepresented in particular data sources.

We hope that future studies will build on this work by employing a mixed methods approach that carefully integrates both qualitative and quantitative research to provide a more holistic and accurate picture of these populations.

COMMONALITIES ACROSS COMMUNITIES

The family as an institution is core to all the communities. The family unit—both nuclear and intergenerational extended family—is in many ways sacrosanct; it is where Judaism is learned, manifested, enacted, and transmitted. Deep and abiding family relationships, family responsibilities, expectations of remaining in close proximity to family members (with the exception in this study of Sephardic Latin Jews), and consistent and regular family gatherings for Shabbat, holidays, and other celebrations, all mark the central role of family in these Sephardic communities.

METHODOLOGY & SCOPE

The four community portraits focus on Syrian Jews in Brooklyn, Persian Jews in Los Angeles, Bukharian Jews in Queens, and Latin Sephardic Jews in South Florida

The interview subjects in these studies are overwhelmingly individuals who identify as embedded in their community networks—not those who are loosely affiliated or geographically distant

These portraits are based on qualitative research—in-depth interviews and observations—not representative surveys

Sephardic religious practice in the four communities reflects a strong sense of traditionalism, an approach that combines reverence for religious laws, customs, legitimations, and authorities, especially in the communities' public spaces, with flexibility in personal and family religious observance. Certain practices, such as sharing Shabbat dinner with family, observing major holidays, and maintaining communal traditions, are widely upheld among traditional Jews in these communities. Traditionalism reflects how these communities' historical processes and encounters with modernity did not include denominational divisions—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist—that characterize much of Ashkenazi US Jewry. At the same time, there has been a gradual shift toward the religious right among Syrian, Bukharian, and Latin Sephardic Jews, marked by an increased emphasis on personal and public religious observance. This shift has been catalyzed by alignments and interactions with, and in some cases the adoption of, Orthodox or Haredi Judaism. Of the four communities studied in this report, only the Persian community in Los Angeles has experienced a more diverse communal trend, with some parts of the community moving towards Orthodoxy and other parts participating in Reform and Conservative Jewish institutions.

The communities are engaged in a constant negotiation of change and continuity. Community members desire to make new lives for themselves and to succeed in America. At the same time, they have an abiding connection to cultures in their countries of origin, though typically not to the current regimes in those places or to non-Jewish immigrants from the same countries. Another key dimension of change is across generations, with some younger community members slowly adopting new perspectives on education, occupation, gender, and family. At the same time, there is a strong preference for traditional ethnic connections—marriage with other community members being perhaps the best example—and cultural practices and norms, even among younger community members.

Most community members exhibit a notable resistance to language that frames race as their primary identity, categorizes them as JOC, or positions them as a minority group in need of DEI initiatives.

Lastly, community members are in general socially and politically conservative. This applies to US domestic issues, their strongly-held connections to Israel and Zionism, and their vigorous sense of belonging to the Jewish people.

RESPONSES TO SOCIAL CHALLENGES

Syrian Jews have built robust institutions and organizations that form the backbone of their tight-knit community

Of the four communities studied in this report, only the Persian community in Los Angeles has experienced a more diverse communal trend, with some parts of the community moving towards Orthodoxy and other parts participating in Reform and Conservative Jewish institutions.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN COMMUNITIES

While the four communities share many commonalities, they also differ in key ways. The factors that brought them to the United States vary. Early Syrian Jews migrated primarily in search of better economic opportunities, while later Syrian Jews and most Persian Jews fled anti-Jewish regimes. For Syrian Jews, this was driven by the Syrian regime's long-standing anti-Jewish policies, including severe restrictions on emigration, what community informants describe as being kept in Syria as "virtual prisoners." For Persian Jews, it was a sudden and cataclysmic upheaval triggered by the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Bukharians emigrated from Central Asia as the Soviet Union collapsed and emerging Muslim-majority states created unpredictable situations for Jews. Latin Sephardic Jews left to escape social upheavals and severe economic disruptions where they were living.

Relationships with the majority-Ashkenazi population and institutions differ. The Syrian Jewish community has created a set of strong community institutions that allow it to remain highly independent of Ashkenazi communities and institutions. The Persian Jewish community in Los Angeles has some independent institutions and is also highly integrated in Ashkenazi-led institutions. Bukharian Jews also combine some independent institutions while having integrated into Ashkenazi Orthodox frameworks to varying degrees. In South Florida, Latin Sephardic Jews are less of a cohesive community with a network of institutions and more of a population hub centered primarily around synagogues. All four communities navigate interactions with Ashkenazi institutions in various ways but often encounter cultural friction and a lack of recognition for their distinct traditions.

The communities and their institutions vary in how they address the social challenges that accompany migration and have emerged over time in America. These challenges include caring for elders, supporting those in need, and addressing mental health and addiction. Coming from cultures where such issues were often not spoken about outside the home, these topics can carry stigma, creating unique hurdles that require culturally sensitive approaches. The Syrian community, with its long-established institutions, is better equipped to respond to social needs, including mental health and addiction, in a way that reflects its culture and sensitivities. By contrast, such services among Persian, Bukharian, and Latin Sephardic Jews remain less developed, and issues like addiction and mental health are not easily or openly discussed due to significant stigma.

Lastly, the Persian and Latin Sephardic communities stand out in ways particular to each of them. Though generally socially and politically conservative, the Persian community has a small but significant liberal/progressive segment, particularly among younger community members. The Persian community also stands out for its stronger prevalence of self-described secularism (shaped in fact by the secularism in pre-revolution Iran) and for having a significant segment that has found its institutional home in non-Orthodox denominations, such as Conservative institutions. The Latin Sephardic Jews in this study, in turn, are less of a geographically-concentrated ethnic enclave than the other Sephardic communities, and more of a hub of various smaller groups, families, and individuals who reside across a more geographically dispersed area.

PATHS TO THE US: MIGRATION DRIVERS BY COMMUNITY

What drove four Jewish communities to immigrate to the US?

Syrian Jews (Brooklyn)	Latin Sephardic Jews (S. Florida)	Bukharian Jews (Queens)	Persian Jews (L.A.)
Early migration in search of better economic opportunities, while later wave left to flee anti-Jewish regime	Left to escape social upheavals and severe economic disruptions	Soviet Union collapse; Emerging Muslim-majority states created unpredictable situations for Jews.	Upheaval triggered by the Iranian Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran

ADDITIONAL NOTES

A Note on Estimating Community Size

Estimating the size of communities like those featured in this study is challenging. Survey research in immigrant communities, among people whose first language is not English, and among ethnic minorities often leads to population undercounts.

In contrast, estimates from community leaders—who are deeply embedded in community networks—are likely to overcount the true population size. These leaders often base their estimates on factors such as the number of seats sold for High Holiday services or the enrollment of children in educational programs, using these and other indicators to make rough calculations. As a result, community-generated estimates typically yield higher figures than those derived from survey research.

Where possible, we compare community size estimates from external survey data with those provided by community leadership. The true number likely falls somewhere in between, but pinpointing it remains a challenge.

A Note on Names & Portrait Consistency

All names in the portraits are pseudonyms and identifying details have been altered when needed to protect identities. For more information on the community portrait methodology, see the methodological appendix.

This report includes four community portraits, each developed using the same interview protocol to ensure consistency in data collection. However, the focus and presentation of each portrait vary based on the unique themes, priorities, and dynamics that emerged in interviews, resulting in differences in tone and emphasis across the portraits.

NOTES

1 See the 2021 LA community study conducted by the Cohen Center at Brandeis and its data on Persian Jews. As well as UJA's 2023 New York Study and its corresponding data on Syrian Jews and Bukharian Jews